



COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Date: Tuesday, 27 June 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Location: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Contact: Ian Gourlay (01438) 242703

committees@stevenage.gov.uk

Members: Councillors: S Mead (Chair), A Farquharson (Vice-Chair), J Ashley-Wren, F Chowdhury, J Duncan, M Humberstone, W Kerby, C McGrath, E Plater and C Veres

AGENDA

PART I

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

2. TERMS OF REFERENCE

To note the Terms of Reference as agreed at Annual Council on 24 May 2023.
Pages 3 – 4

3. MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETINGS - 9 MARCH & 29 MARCH 2023

To approve as a correct record the Minutes of the Community Select Committee held on Tuesday 9 March and Wednesday 29 March 2023.
Pages 5 – 12

4. COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE SCRUTINY WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24

To note the Community Select Committee's Work Programme and schedule of meetings for 2023-24.
Pages 13 – 20

5. EXECUTIVE MEMBER RESPONSE TO THE HOUSING VOIDS REVIEW & FINAL REPORT

To consider the Executive Member response to the Housing Voids review recommendations and to note a copy of the Committee's final report.
Pages 21 – 36

6. URGENT PART 1 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 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.

8. URGENT PART II BUSINESS

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

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

1. Membership - 10 (not Members of the Executive)
Observer – Stevenage Youth Mayor
2. Quorum - 4
3. Terms of Reference
 - 3.1 To determine a Scrutiny work programme to examine the spending, policies and administration of the Council's services within the purview of the Assistant Director (Housing and Investment), the Assistant Director (Communities and Neighbourhood) and the Assistant Director (Stevenage Direct Services (repairs and caretaking)) and relationships with partners and external agencies involved with these services, together with a timetable and method of study for each topic.
 - 3.2 To determine formal recommendations in relation to scrutiny studies undertaken for reporting to the Council, Executive, other Committees, Officers and / or partner agencies as appropriate.
 - 3.3 To review the Forward Plan of Key Decisions in relation to services within the Committee's remit, considering if it wishes to make any input to policy issues contained in the Plan and if so, how. In undertaking this work the Committee may call upon the relevant Executive Member and/or Assistant Director to provide a briefing or take part in discussion.
 - 3.4 To act as the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee, meeting in that capacity a minimum of once each year (by including Crime and Disorder on the agenda at least once each year).
 - 3.5 That in respect of policy development of matters that fall within the remit of this Committee, to meet with the relevant Portfolio Holder to comment on individual draft policies that are scheduled to be considered to the Executive.
 - 3.6 To work with the other Select Committee or the Overview & Scrutiny Committee, as appropriate when considering cross-cutting scrutiny studies and policy development when both Committees have so agreed.
 - 3.7 To consider matters referred to the Committee under the procedure for the Councillor Call for Action in relation to matters within the purview of the Assistant Director (Housing and Investment) and the Assistant Director (Communities and Neighbourhood).

- 3.8 In accordance with the Petitions Scheme, consider Petitions, Petition Reviews and interview Senior Council Officers (as requested by a Petition) in relation to matters within the purview of the Assistant Director (Housing and Investment) and the Assistant Director (Communities and Neighbourhood).
- 3.9 In conjunction with the other Select Committee and Scrutiny Overview Committee, responsibility for the on-going development of the Policy Development and Scrutiny function of the Council.
- 3.10 To report to the Executive, other committees or Council, as appropriate.

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Thursday, 9 March 2023

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: 7.28pm

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

There were no apologies received.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **MINUTES OF THE PREVIOUS MEETING - MONDAY 9 JANUARY 2023**

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Minutes of the Meeting of the Committee held on 9 January 2023 be approved as a true record of the proceedings and be signed by the Chair.

3 **DRAFT WORK PROGRAMME FOR 2023-24**

The Chair presented the draft Work Programme for the Municipal Year 2023-24 to the Committee. Each scrutiny Member was encouraged to choose a maximum of three suggested items as part of an annual scrutiny survey. The items listed in the report were made up of Members suggestions. The Committee was advised that ideally there was one main scrutiny review item and then shorter updates/one off performance meetings. The Members discussed and debated the following potential scrutiny items currently on the Work Programme for 2023/24:

- Local Community Centres/Local Committees/Resident Meetings – An update on the work on community centres was considered something that would be useful, and this was potentially a substantial piece of policy development work. Another Member highlighted the importance of local committees. The Operations Director advised part of the challenge regarding Community Centres was looking at the existing estate and all the buildings and see housing development opportunities would be possible. There were new schemes, such as the Oval, which bring a lot of opportunities. He also advised that the item was worthy of two separate Portfolio Holder Advisory Group (PHAG) sessions as, although they were related, there was a lot of

work to be done.

- Repairs – The Committee needed a better understanding of this to look at the problems to help residents. A Member suggested there were problems with repairs and the organisation needed to respond quicker to tenants reporting problems. Another Member agreed stating that the majority of resident frustration comes from communication problems. A Member proposed that the Committee should look at the customer journey through repairs, as repairs as a whole subject was too broad.
- Cultural strategy – This was significant to the town and it was useful to see where the redevelopment of Stevenage was at. A Member suggested it would also be helpful to see where the town stood post-covid and what challenges the town faced. The Scrutiny Officer advised this item should be one update and one presentation at most.
- Public Health Scrutiny – The Scrutiny Officer advised this was good practice to look at once a year, and the Committee needed to prioritise this as this year's session didn't take place.

The Scrutiny Officer advised that there were some items that were legal requirements, such as Crime and Disorder, so they weren't included on the list of items.

The Committee decided that some suggested items were better suited for the Overview and Scrutiny Committee. This included SBCs use of consultants, the analysis of the census process and results, and the customer experience. The Operations Director suggested that the census item could also be done in an all-Member briefing as this was relevant to everyone and all policy areas and decisions. The Chair proposed that the suggested item of a cross party team on change and improvement would be better implemented by an executive Member and could be forwarded to the Leader.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Committee noted the draft Work Programme for 2023-24 and agreed that the work programme should include:

- A review of repairs (main review item)
- An update on the Cultural Strategy (one off performance review)
- A policy development item on Community Centres (Portfolio Holder Advisory Group)
- A Public Health meeting
- Statutory Crime and Disorder Committee meeting

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

The Chair introduced the draft report and recommendations of the scrutiny review of housing voids. She summarised that this review was to look at why the voids

process took so long.

In response to Member comments/questions, Officers advised:

- There was room for improvement and the Council was reviewing processes but reminded Members to be mindful of the resources available.
- The 26-day target was a historic target. This didn't just include void repairs but the entire letting process. There was national benchmarking data available, but national standards can't always compare to local levels. It was advised data and comparisons were being identified from neighbouring districts.
- The tenant's responsibility was contained in the letting agreement, but it would be useful to remind them periodically through communication and inspections. Proactive inspections were important to prevent issues such as unreported damage or repairs and unauthorised modifications.

Members agreed on the following recommendations, with the additional conditions/changes:

- 4.2.1 "Carry out a programmed cycle of inspections on properties. See paragraph 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. and on any such visits a checklist in relation to a disrepair/defects survey should be completed."
- 4.6.1 "That Officers provide Members with a detailed proposal of the end-to-end void process..."
- 4.7.1 "The Committee is keen for Officers to explore ways to hold tenants to account for keeping SBC's property/their home in good repair. Where there are rechargeable repairs identified in inspection activity or otherwise, throughout the term of the tenancy that the tenant is charged, at discretion, to avoid leaving multiple repairs and a large bill at the end of the tenancy. This should include unauthorised modifications."

The removal of recommendation 8 – Undertake a review of the lettable standard.

It was **RESOLVED**: That the Committee noted the draft report and supported the recommendations of the scrutiny review of housing voids, with the above amendments.

5 URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS

There was none.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

There was none.

CHAIR

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Wednesday, 29 March 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

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

Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren (Substitute)

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.20pm

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

Apologies for absence were received on behalf of Councillors Stephen Booth (substituted by Councillor Julie Ashley-Wren), Adrian Brown and John Duncan.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 **CRIME & DISORDER COMMITTEE**

The Select Committee sitting as the Council's Crime and Disorder Committee, received a presentation from Inspector Patrick McPeake from Herts Constabulary on community safety matters that the Police had been engaged in over the past year.

As well as Inspector McPeake, the Executive Portfolio Holder responsible for Community Safety, Councillor Jackie Hollywell and the Council's Community Safety Manager were also in attendance at the meeting.

The Chair advised that she had asked the Police for a statement in relation to the recent review by Baroness Casey into the standards of behaviour and internal culture of the Metropolitan Police Service.

Inspector McPeake began by giving assurances to the Committee that Hertfordshire Police had the appropriate processes and procedure in place to address those issues raised in Baroness Casey's report. He advised that the mechanisms for anyone both internal and external to the Police, were in place for them to come forward with any concerns. He did, however, agree there was work for the Police to do to restore and maintain public confidence and trust following recent troubling incidents.

The Inspector then gave a presentation to the Committee around the issues of burglary in the Town and the use of cannabis in the Town.

Burglary

The following points were made to the Committee in respect of burglary in the Town:

- 78 residential (dwelling) burglaries had been reported between 31 January 2022 and 1 February 2023. This was made up of 52 full offences, where entry had actually been gained and items stolen and 23 attempted offences where entry had been tried but was unsuccessful. The final three offences related to aggravated and distraction offences where offenders had distracted, often lied to homeowners to gain entry and steal. Members were pleased to note that this was a quite rare occurrence in Stevenage;
- A location map was shared with the Committee. Most localities had only singular offences and the most prevalent offending time period was 06:00 – 18:00 hrs;
- In relation to burglary residential (non- dwelling) there had been 62 business full offences and 8 attempts plus 42 non-dwelling full offences with 7 attempts. It was noted that the focus of this offending type was mainly within the Town Centre area;
- The Committee was advised that the Police had identified a suspect in 15.8% of investigations with a charge rate of 8%. Nationally the charge rate was 5% with the whole of Hertfordshire at 3.8%;
- Stevenage currently had the largest Scorpion Team in any CSP. These were proactive plain clothed officers who prioritised the pursuit and arrest of key individuals including burglars;
- A number of key investigatory reviews were currently being undertaken by the Police to identify patterns and themes and to ensure the standard of investigations was thorough and consistent and ensured certain actions took place at all residential burglaries. Personal attendance by both the initial officer and a detective was also a target for the Police;
- All forensic hits relating to Stevenage CSP (fingerprint, DNA, blood etc) were reviewed and it was reported that no forensic hits on burglars were outstanding.

The Chair thanked the police for their increased visible patrols of the Town including the Westgate Centre which had made a big difference and increased the confidence of the Town Centre business owners.

Cannabis

The following points were made to the Committee in respect of the prevalence of cannabis in the Town and what was being done to address this:

- In total, cannabis accounted for 34% of drug type found across the county and was the largest single drug. Across all CSP's Stevenage had the highest for all drug type supply offending with 38 out of a countywide 238 offences;
- When narrowed to cannabis, 11 of the 81 case occurred in Stevenage placing the CSP joint 2nd highest in the county;
- The Committee was advised that the Stevenage Scorpion team were proactive regarding drug supply regardless of type. In the past 12 months 24

- of the 52 searches related specifically to cannabis were positive;
- Operation SOHO, the policing response to increased tensions between two street gang/groups affiliated with differing areas of the Town which had disrupted some of the cannabis supply within the CSP.

In response to a question, Inspector McPeake advised that Operation Educate which targeted pupils in Year 9 run by the Police in collaboration with individuals with lived experiences, had been very successful and it was hoped it would be rolled out County wide. Police visits were also made to younger pupils to help build positive relationships with the Police at a young age.

The Portfolio Holder advised that she was keen to make services such as the No More Service part of the Council's core funding offer but that this was difficult due to the financial restraints the Council was under.

Town Centre Crime

The following points were made to the Committee in respect of crime in the Town Centre:

- Between 1 January 2023 and 20 March 2023 there were 48 reported shopliftings, 16 reported theft from persons, 5 pedal cycle thefts, 5 personal robberies and 15 other thefts;
- The police response to the Town Centre included:
 - Operation target – 15 minute patrols of identified hotspots;
 - Operation Twist – plain clothes patrols to identify purse dippers within the Town Centre;
 - Various engagement events;
 - Seasonal patrols November – December 2022;
 - Policing priorities set to tackle ASB related issues within the Town.

In response to a comment from the Chair regarding police resources, Inspector McPeake advised that although the Police had more resources and larger teams than previously, the demand for those Police Officers had also increased, both in terms of the administration required and the amount of crime recorded but also the demand relating to mental health cases.

In response to a question regarding the recent Policing Priorities Group held with Members, the Portfolio Holder and the Community Safety Manager agreed to look at the arrangements alongside the police for this meeting going forward.

The Chair thanked inspector McPeake for his attendance and presentation to the Committee.

3 **URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None.

4 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

5 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR

Lead AD	Operations Director (Housing & Investment, Communities and Neighbourhoods) – Rob Gregory
Deputy	Vacant
Chair	Cllr Sarah Mead
Vice-Chair	Cllr Alex Farquharson

Community Select Committee Scrutiny Work Programme 2023-24
(Including main review items, one-off meetings, statutory and standing items, review revisits and policy development items)

Scrutiny Review items 2022/23: (Priority of potential scrutiny review items High/Medium/Low and suitability in 2022/23)	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Other details: i.e. (i) Number of meetings item can be covered in? (ii) Whether scoping required? (iii) Expectation/ style of meeting & (iv) other details	Comment by lead Assistant Director/Deputy	SD/AD Comment - Likelihood of being delivered in 2022-23?	Complete ✓ ✗
<u>Main review item on Repairs</u> (High priority statutory Committee & suitable for Scrutiny in 2023-24)	New Assistant Director, Building Safety and Property Services and Portfolio Holder for Housing, Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.	To be scheduled. Likely to start in Summer/Autumn 2023, with general officer presentation Possible dates – First meeting for presentation & scope Thursday 19 Oct 2023	(i) This will require a number of meetings to complete the review (ii) Yes, full scope required (iii) Interviews with the Operations Director and Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing, Housing Development Cllr Jeannette Thomas	The review will start with a presentation covering the main features of the service and then Members will need to narrow down their review to a specific issue and carry out a scope of the review before undertaking it.	As the main review item this will be completed in 2023-24	

Scrutiny Review items 2022/23: (Priority of potential scrutiny review items High/Medium/Low and suitability in 2022/23)	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Other details: i.e. (i) Number of meetings item can be covered in? (ii) Whether scoping required? (iii) Expectation/ style of meeting & (iv) other details	Comment by lead Assistant Director/Deputy	SD/AD Comment - Likelihood of being delivered in 2022-23?	Complete ✓ ✗
		Tue 14 Nov Mon 8 Jan 2024 Wed 31 Jan 2024				
<u>Statutory Item - Crime & Disorder Committee</u> (High priority statutory Committee & suitable for Scrutiny in 2023-24)	AD Communities & Neighbourhood, Rob Gregory, Lead Officer Sarah Pateman, Portfolio Holder for Communities (including Safer Communities) Cllr Jackie Hollywell	Agreed date – 21 March 2024	(i) Yes, covered in one meeting (ii) No scope required (iii) Interviews with Chair of RAG, Herts Constabulary, Portfolio Holder with responsibility for Community Safety looking at past performance of the Community Safety Action Plan and future priorities		Comment from Scrutiny Officer - as the commitment is just one meeting this will be delivered.	This is a statutory item so will be delivered.
<u>Standing Item - Public Health</u> (High priority &	OD Housing & Communities & Neighbourhood, Rob	Agreed date - Jim McManus can	(i) Yes, covered in one meeting (ii) No scope required	Members indicated that they value this session with the HCC	Comment from Scrutiny Officer - as the	The Chair and Vice-Chair are

Scrutiny Review items 2022/23: (Priority of potential scrutiny review items High/Medium/Low and suitability in 2022/23)	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Other details: i.e. (i) Number of meetings item can be covered in? (ii) Whether scoping required? (iii)Expectation/ style of meeting & (iv) other details	Comment by lead Assistant Director/Deputy	SD/AD Comment - Likelihood of being delivered in 2022-23?	Complete ✓ ✗
suitable for Scrutiny in 2022-23) Page 15	Gregory, Health & Sports Strategy Manager, Candice Bryan Portfolio Holder for Housing Health & Older People Cllr Jeannette Thomas	attend 26 July 2023 Possible follow up in February 2024?	(iii) Interviews with the HCC Director of Public Health, SBC Executive Portfolio Holder with responsibility for Public Health and the SD for Community. (iv) Other Members to be invited – Cllr Maureen McKay, HCC Health Scrutiny Member	Director of Public Health and would like to focus on general health and wellbeing and specifically on Health Inequalities for Stevenage. Professor McManus will update Members on the newly established NHS Integrated Care Boards (replacing Clinical Commissioning Groups)	commitment is just one meeting this will be delivered.	keen for this item to be supported so will be delivered.
<u>One-off update on the Cultural Strategy</u>	Operations Director Housing & Investment, Communities & Neighbourhoods Rob Gregory,	Possible date 19 September – To be confirmed	(i) Yes, covered in one meeting (ii) No scope required (iii) Interviews with the Operations Director and Executive Portfolio		Comment from Scrutiny Officer - as the commitment is just one meeting this	

Scrutiny Review items 2022/23: (Priority of potential scrutiny review items High/Medium/Low and suitability in 2022/23)	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Other details: i.e. (i) Number of meetings item can be covered in? (ii) Whether scoping required? (iii)Expectation/ style of meeting & (iv) other details	Comment by lead Assistant Director/Deputy	SD/AD Comment - Likelihood of being delivered in 2022-23?	Complete ✓ ✗
Page 9	The Leader, Cllr Richard Henry (Executive Portfolio Holder for Culture to be determined for 2023-24 Municipal Year)		Holder for Neighbourhoods, Cllr Rob Broom		will be delivered.	
2024-25 Work Programme		Wed 29 February 2024	One off meeting			

Monitoring of Previous Recommendations/Actions								
Scrutiny items: (Follow up in 2022/23)	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Number of meetings item can be covered in?	Expectation/ Style of meeting	Scoping details (whether full scope or simple scope required)	Other details	Comment by lead Assistant Director/ Deputy	Complete ✓ ✗

Monitoring of Previous Recommendations/Actions								
Scrutiny items: (Follow up in 2022/23)	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Number of meetings item can be covered in?	Expectation/ Style of meeting	Scoping details (whether full scope or simple scope required)	Other details	Comment by lead Assistant Director/ Deputy	Complete ✓ ✘
Voids Review – Executive Member response & note final report		Tue 27 June 2023	One meeting		N/A			
Action Tracker 26 July 2023.	N/A	26 July 2023	(i) <u>Covered in a single meeting</u> revisiting the previous review and seeing where we are today		N/A			

Any monitoring of previous reviews will be agreed when the Committee considers the action tracker at a meeting of the Committee on 26 July 2023

Pre-Scrutiny Policy Development	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Number of meetings item can be covered in?	Expectation/Style of meeting	Scoping details (whether full scope or simple scope)	Other details	Complete ✓ ✘
<u>Pre-Scrutiny on Community</u>	Operations Director Housing &	To be scheduled.	To be advised but possibly	Opportunity for Executive Portfolio			

Pre-Scrutiny Policy Development	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Number of meetings item can be covered in?	Expectation/Style of meeting	Scoping details (whether full scope or simple scope)	Other details	Complete ✓ ✗
<u>Centres</u> Page	Investment, Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory, Portfolio Holder for Communities and Neighbourhoods, Cllr Sandra Barr.		conducted in one meeting.	Holder to meet with officers and Scrutiny Members to discuss content and shape of a Policy document before it is finalised in order to shape the final outcome			
<u>Pre-Scrutiny Allocations Policy</u>		To be scheduled for a meeting in late Summer 2023.	To be advised but possibly conducted in one meeting.	To be agreed. A possible option would be to hold an informal meeting of CSC Members ahead of a formal Committee meeting			
<u>Pre-Scrutiny Housing Management Governance (replacement for HMAB)</u>	Operations Director Housing & Investment, Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory	To be scheduled for a meeting Sep/Oct 2023	To be advised but possibly conducted in one meeting.	To be agreed. A possible option would be to hold an informal meeting of CSC Members ahead of a formal Committee meeting		The Chair has said that she would like to invite some tenants to attend a session with the CSC to validate this process.	
<u>Pre-Scrutiny Fairlands</u>	ADs for SDS Steve Dupoy & Operations	To be scheduled.	To be advised but possibly	To be agreed. A possible option		This pre-scrutiny would consider the way	

Pre-Scrutiny Policy Development	Strategic Director, Assistant Director, Lead Officer(s) & Portfolio Holder	Provisional meeting date(s) identified	Number of meetings item can be covered in?	Expectation/Style of meeting	Scoping details (whether full scope or simple scope)	Other details	Complete ✓ ✘
<u>Valley Activity Centre</u> Page 19	Director Housing & Investment, Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory		conducted in one meeting.	would be to hold an informal meeting of CSC Members ahead of a formal Committee meeting		forward for this much valued community asset, looking at ways to sympathetically develop the asset commercially. This could be joint session with some E&E Select Committee Members	

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Executive Member Response to Review of Housing Voids

Date Recommendations agreed by Community Select Committee:

Considered at Community Select Committee, Thursday 9 March 2023
(circulated Thursday 30 March 2023, following changes made at the Committee meeting to the report and recommendations which were subsequently signed off by the Operations Director and Chair 21 March 2023)

Date responses should be made by:

Executive responses on behalf of the Executive Portfolio Holders for:
Deputy Leader, Housing and Housing Development should be received by Thursday 25 May 2023

Recommendations:

Executive Response:

RECOMMENDATION 1 - Carry out Tenancy Audit of properties

Carry out a programmed cycle of inspections on properties. (See para 3.1.3 of report). 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,

Response supported by Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory; Operations Manager Managing Homes, Karen Long and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.

Initial HRA funding is being used to kick start a tenancy audit programme to include checking all the conventions of the tenancy agreement including standard of repair and condition of property and garden. Housing Officers will document details of the audit and

<p>non-payment of rent as well as any planned maintenance or reactive maintenance visits to the property etc. and on any such visits a checklist in relation to a disrepair/defects survey should be completed.</p> <p>Action: Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory & Operations Manager Managing Homes, Karen Long.</p>	<p>ensure action is taken in relation to disrepair and breaches of tenancy agreement. Contact with tenants will also be made 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.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 2 - Parallel processes</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. • 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. <p>Action: Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory & Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson.</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory; Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.</i></p> <p>The new Voids service model will include a pre-void inspection within 5 working days of notice received. Works required will be scoped to ensure void loss is kept to a minimum. If a tenant vacates the property before the end of the notice period, permission will be gained to enable works to start.</p> <p>As soon as the Council is legally able to do so, work will begin on properties where the tenant has abandoned.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 3 - Regular sharing of useful data on voids with Members</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide data on all void properties for a twelve-month period. To see what the actual performance of Void 	<p><i>Response supported by Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory; Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.</i></p>

<p>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.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 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. <p>Action: Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory & Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson.</p>	<p>The Empty Homes Co-ordinator tracks the progress of all void properties and can provide specific information alongside the current performance measures. The Voids review project team are reviewing the proposed approach to Executive KPIs based on benchmarking and a new target service model. New operational KPIs to enable effective monitoring of project benefits and continuous improvement will also be developed. Both the new Executive & Operational KPIs will be implemented as part of the project go-live, estimated to be in November 2023 and will be reported as part of the quarterly corporate performance report.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 4 – Recruitment</u></p> <p>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.</p> <p>Action: Assistant Director, Stevenage Direct Services, Steve Dupoy; Service Delivery Manager, Dean Stevens</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Assistant Director, Stevenage Direct Services, Steve Dupoy; Service Delivery Manager, Dean Stevens and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.</i></p> <p>The Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development and in turn the Community Select Committee will be kept updated on progress with recruitment and retention of officers working across the Voids process. The temporary partnership arrangements for the voids repairs works will also be monitored.</p> <p>Stevenage Direct Services have recently recruited a temporary project officer and will be advertising shortly for a further permanent project operative.</p> <p>To establish the new service model for voids, the Investment Team will soon be recruiting a new Voids Manager, who will manage two</p>

	Project Officers and take the 'client' responsibility for managing the complete void end-to-end process.
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 5 - a revised Officer data capture of end-to-end void process</u></p> <p>That officers provide Members with a detailed 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.</p> <p>Action: Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory & Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson.</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory; Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.</i></p> <p>The Voids project team will present a detailed proposal of the end-to-end void process prior to the new service model launch proposed for November 2023.</p>
<p><u>RECOMMENDATION 6 – investigate potential incentives and penalties to encourage tenants to maintain their rented properties in a reasonable condition</u></p> <p>As referred to in paragraph 3.1.7 the Committee is keen for officers to explore ways to hold tenants to account for keeping SBC's property/their home in good repair. Where there are rechargeable repairs identified in inspection activity or otherwise, throughout the term of the tenancy, that the tenant is charged, at discretion, to avoid leaving multiple repairs and a large bill at the end of the tenancy. This should include unauthorised modifications.</p> <p>Action: Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory & Operations Manager Managing Homes, Karen Long.</p>	<p><i>Response supported by Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory; Operations Manager Managing Homes, Karen Long and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.</i></p> <p>The new regime of audits will ensure rechargeable repairs and unauthorised alterations are identified during the tenancy rather than when notice is received. Housing Officers will ensure recharges are raised and the Income Maximisation team will pursue debts.</p> <p>The new Voids Service model will include an effective re-charge policy with pro-active measures around good tenancy management supported by tenancy audits with clear information about tenants' obligations.</p>

RECOMMENDATION 7 - Pursue better benchmarking with similar local authorities

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 of the report). 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.

Action: Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory & Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson.

Response supported by Operations Director, Housing Investment & Communities & Neighbourhoods, Rob Gregory; Operations Manager Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson and Executive Portfolio Holders with responsibility for Housing & Housing Development, Cllr Jeannette Thomas.

Officers have gained some useful insights from working with Welwyn and Hatfield & Dacorum district councils and will maintain knowledge sharing with local providers in Hertfordshire around best practice. Separately through our involvement with the Association for Retained Council Housing (ARCH) we will identify other opportunities to benchmark with other districts with retained stock.

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Meeting: COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Housing & Housing Development

Date: 27 JUNE 2023

FINAL REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOIDS

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Operations Director, Rob Gregory; Assistant Director, Steve Dupoy and Operations
Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson

1 PURPOSE

1.1 To note the final report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee Scrutiny, looking at the performance of void properties within the Council's housing stock. Members commented and made changes to the draft report at the CSC meeting on 9 March 2023, therefore this report is just for noting.

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 formally on 4 occasions to undertake the review as follows: On 5 September 2022, 11 October 2022 and 2 November 2022, and on 9 March 2023 to consider the draft report and held 2 site visits days on 13 October 2022 to visit 3 properties at various stages of the void process at properties in Roebuck, Bedwell and Martinswood and a revisit on 2 November 2022 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. and on any such visits a checklist in relation to a disrepair/defects survey should be completed.

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 detailed 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 Committee is keen for officers to explore ways to hold tenants to account for keeping SBC's property/their home in good repair. Where there are rechargeable repairs identified in inspection activity or otherwise, throughout the term of the tenancy, that the tenant is charged, at discretion, to avoid leaving multiple repairs and a large bill at the end of the tenancy. This should include unauthorised modifications.
- 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.
- 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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