

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Wednesday, 5 February 2025

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair) (Chair), (Vice Chair), Stephen Booth, Leanne Brady, Akin Elekolusi, Alistair Gordon, Lynda Guy and Jade Woods

Start / End Start Time: 6.00pm
Time: End Time: 7.00pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Committee Members Councillor (Vice Chair), Kamal Choudhury and Mason Humberstone.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 AIDS AND ADAPTATIONS POLICY DEVELOPMENT ITEM

The Committee received a presentation from the Council's Aids and Adaptation Project Manager, who introduced the Aids and Adaptations team. It was explained that the current policy, approved in March 2020, outlined the scope of adaptations, council responsibilities and service expectations. Tenants were eligible for adaptations based on health conditions such as sight, hearing, speech impairment, mental or physical disabilities. It was noted that adaptations had to be necessary, appropriate, reasonable, and practical to be approved by the Council, in accordance with the Equalities Act 2010 and the Housing, Grants, Construction and Regeneration Act 1996.

The Aids and Adaptation Project Manager outlined the range of adaptations available, from minor adaptations such as grab rails and ramps to major adaptations including stairlifts or bathroom adaptations. The Committee was informed that the Aids and Adaptations Policy had been reviewed in June 2024, with no significant changes proposed. The outcome of the review is scheduled to be presented to Cabinet in March 2025.

Members raised concerns about the reasons for refusal of adaptations and the lack of transparency within the policy. They requested a detailed list of refusal criteria to be included. Officers stated that decisions were decided on a case-by-case basis, allowing for individual assessments based on the tenant's needs and the suitability of the property. Members suggested that housing policy should prioritise individuals rather than properties, despite ongoing pressures from the housing list. Members also expressed concerns that tenants should not feel forced to relocate rather than

completing adaptations to their current property.

Officers reassured Members that the Aids and Adaptation team work closely with other Council departments to provide support and suitable alternatives, such as Independent Living Schemes where additional support for tenants is available, without enforcing relocation. They clarified that while incentives for downsizing were available, no tenant would be forced to move. If a tenant chose to remain in the property, the Council would assess what reasonable adaptations could be made.

Further discussion focused on the interpretation of 'reasonable' adaptations, with Members seeking greater clarity on which types were more likely to be approved. Officers explained that each case was assessed individually based on the tenant's needs and the suitability of the property. The principle of reasonableness needed to underpin any decision that is reached about whether an adaptation could be carried out.

It was noted that Council officers worked alongside Occupational Therapists (OT's) to assess properties and recommend necessary adaptations. However, it was acknowledged that some recommendations might not be structurally or logistically feasible and would need a surveyor assessment regarding the feasibility of OT's recommendation. Members were informed that OT's recommendations are not standardised which makes it challenging to establish requirements for the tenant, and careful consideration is needed on a case-by-case basis.

Members raised concerns that the policy did not fully consider tenants' disabilities when assessing under-occupation. Members sought clarification on this issue, highlighting the potential negative impact of relocation on residents' safety, security and independence. In response, Officers confirmed that following guidance from the Disabled Facilities Grant (DFG), section 6.10.1 of the Aids and Adaptations Policy would be removed. They assured Members that cases would be assessed individually, and work would not be refused outright. Instead, support would be provided through supported accommodation, downsizing options, or the resident liaison team. If relocation was not in the resident's best interest, necessary adaptations would proceed where possible.

The Committee was informed about the Aids and Adaptation Consultation, which took place from December 2024 to mid-January 2025. The consultation aimed to gather feedback from residents and health professionals on the proposed policy updates. Of the 600 people invited to participate, 131 responses were received, equating to a 22% return rate, which exceeded the 15% deemed a good response by Housemark. Additionally, 38 individuals expressed interest in joining a focus group.

The presentation also addressed the budget and expenditure for Aids and Adaptations. The average annual cost of referrals estimated at £1.4 million, although actual expenditure typically amounted to 60% of this figure due to factors such as lower costs for groundworks against projected. While projected costs for 2024/25 referrals stood at £1.3 million, the actual value of work was £810,000 due to policy implementation and evolving needs. Officers emphasised that earlier review of referrals would improve cost forecasting and ensure more accurate projections.

A question was raised regarding the budget allocation and expenditure. Officers explained that a framework agreement had been under evaluation to streamline work and improve efficiency. Additionally, it was clarified that the budget allocation is from the Housing Revenue Account (HRA) and rental income, with no external grants available. An example was provided of a case recommendation which was estimated at £30,000, however following a survey of the property the work was not feasible. Through negotiations and surveyor involvement, a more practical and affordable solution was agreed with the OT which would cost approx. £400 plus labour. Additionally, a stairlift contract will be procured in 2025/26 to reduce the need for tendering work through procurements. As part of this contract, options for renting equipment were being explored, along with potential strategies for reusing existing equipment.

A Committee Member asked about the referral process for aids and adaptations. Officers explained that referrals were made through Hertfordshire County Council (HCC) Adult Care or Children's Services, where an assessment was conducted on both the individual and their property. These referrals could be initiated through self-submission or made on behalf of an individual. It was noted that assessment waiting times were often long, however once completed referrals were forwarded to Stevenage Borough Council, who then liaised with OTs. Efforts were underway to improve this process, as the level of detail and clarity in referrals varied.

The Committee were presented with case study examples, including a family of five living in a three-bedroom property, where all three children had mobility issues and one required a wheelchair. Due to the limited space within the property, it was determined that extending the property was the most reasonable solution to meet their needs. It was noted that the possibility of relocating the family had been explored but was not feasible due to the lack of suitably sized properties.

Members suggested that as a way of helping the environment and saving resources, officers explore ways to potentially reuse equipment, whether through private or council provided equipment.

The Aids and Adaptations project manager outlined the challenges faced within the team which included:

- A backlog of cases due to resourcing issues, with recruitment efforts underway.
- Budgetary pressures being managed through framework contracts.
- IT systems under review to enhance efficiency.
- Improved collaboration with HCC OTs and healthcare professionals to enhance service delivery.
- Limited availability of suitable accommodation, downsizing incentives, and appropriate development properties to meet future needs.

At this juncture, Officers provided an overview of the improvements being implemented within the Aids and Adaptations service including:

- Data cleansing to identify and address backlog cases.
- Framework agreements reducing procurement demands.
- A task and finish group established between Stevenage Borough Council and

HCC to improve information sharing.

- Increased collaboration between the Aids and Adaptations team and other departments across the council to better match tenants with suitable properties.
- Acknowledgement of the need for more bungalows and larger properties to meet demand.

A question was raised regarding the current waiting list, which stood at approximately 380 live cases, with around 70-80 in progress, including minor works. It was noted that minor works were typically completed within 20 working days, whereas major works could take up to 18 months due to the backlog. To improve efficiency, framework contracts were being procured to accelerate completion times.

3 URGENT PART I BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part I Business

4 EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS

Not required.

5 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

There was no Urgent Part II Business.

CHAIR