

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

Date: Monday, 5 September 2022

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair) Alex Farquharson (Vice-Chair), Stephen Booth, Jim Brown, Nazmin Chowdhury, John Duncan, Liz Harrington, Wendy Kerby and Anne Wells.

Start / End Time: Start Time: 6:00 pm
End Time: 7:06 pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were received from Councillor Adrian Brown.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - 7 JULY 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of Community Select Committee meeting held on Thursday 7 July 2022 be approved as correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 OFFICER PRESENTATION ON VOIDS

The Committee received a presentation regarding Council's housing voids. The presentation outlined the issues and challenges that faced the Council in dealing with void properties in the Council's social housing stock. The Housing Supply Manager and the SDS Service Delivery Manager provided the following key points to the Committee:

- Void properties resulted in a loss of rental income for the Council.
- Costs were incurred for any work required to ensure the property met lettable standards.
- The Repairs Team received on average 7 void properties per week.
- The current turnaround targets from one tenant moving out to a new tenant moving in was 32 days on average for a general needs property.
- Historically the turnaround for sheltered housing void properties were longer as the properties needed more work.
- The void properties were processed in the following three stages, with the teams providing the service denoted in brackets:
 - Pre-void and tenancy termination (Housing and Investment team)
 - Followed by the voids works (Repairs and Voids Team)

- Inspection and letting (Housing and Investment team)
- 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.
- The Voids Team were struggling with the demand and currently working at 50% capacity. The Team was in the process of recruiting a Voids Officer, a Voids Operative and 3 DLO operatives to ease the pressure.
- Some of the challenges that impacted the delay in void operations were: dealing with asbestos; condition of the property; level of aids and adaptation; major works and some hard to let properties.
- The specialist team removed some of the major asbestos to improve the condition of the property to a standard lettable property.
- The cost involved in carrying major works at the void properties had gone up due to the sharp rise in inflation linked to the cost-of-living crisis.
- Where possible, adapted properties were matched up to people who needed the adaptation to avoid extra cost of removing the adaptations and making good the property.

The Committee discussed the issues around voids, and during the discussion the following points were raised by Members:

- Key improvement would take place in the next six months. These changes included to re-engineer the letting process, reviewing the lettable standard and benchmarking with other local authorities that had a similar housing stock.
- The Service Delivery Manager advised that most of the properties needed some work to turn them into a lettable standard.
- The Housing Supply Manager explained that some of the properties were hard to let because they were in less popular areas, or these properties were not suitable for some families if it already had some adaptations or with the less popular older sheltered accommodation for older people. On some occasion, customer also refused to take on the property, which Members were keen to explore the reasons for this, as this seemed curious given the lack of affordable rented accommodation available.
- Members were advised that customers could be penalised if they refused a property for the second time.
- Members were informed that the Service was reviewing the process to improve including a pre-void inspection and the programme of visits during the tenancy.
- Following a comment 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, perhaps if they were 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 the case.

Councillor John Duncan, who had met with officers to explore the process explained that the current voids process was old fashion and was not sufficiently customer focused. He explained that there was not a single issue that if corrected could

transform the service. The Council needed to look at ways to retain skilled staff as the pay levels were below the industry standard. More focused benchmarking could also improve the Council's perceived performance compared to other housing providers. He clarified that he was not proposing any major changes to the process but rather to improve the process by refocused procedures.

Members noted that a scoping document for the review would be submitted to a future meeting of the Committee and as part of the scope Members wished to carry out some site visits to observe the void process at various stages.

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

4 **UPDATED WORK PROGRAMME**

The Scrutiny Officer presented a report on the Committee's Work Programme for the rest of the current Municipal Year 2022/23. He advised Members the Crime and Disorder was a statutory annual item for the Committee scheduled for March 2023. The Committee would also look at the Public Health as priority item and a one-off update on the Local Community budget.

It was **RESOLVED** that the updated Work Programme be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

7 **URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR