

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**NOTES OF THE COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
SITE VISIT TO VOID PROPERTIES FOR THE SCRUTINY REVIEW OF VOIDS**

Date: Thursday, 13 October 2022

Time: 1pm

Site visit locations:

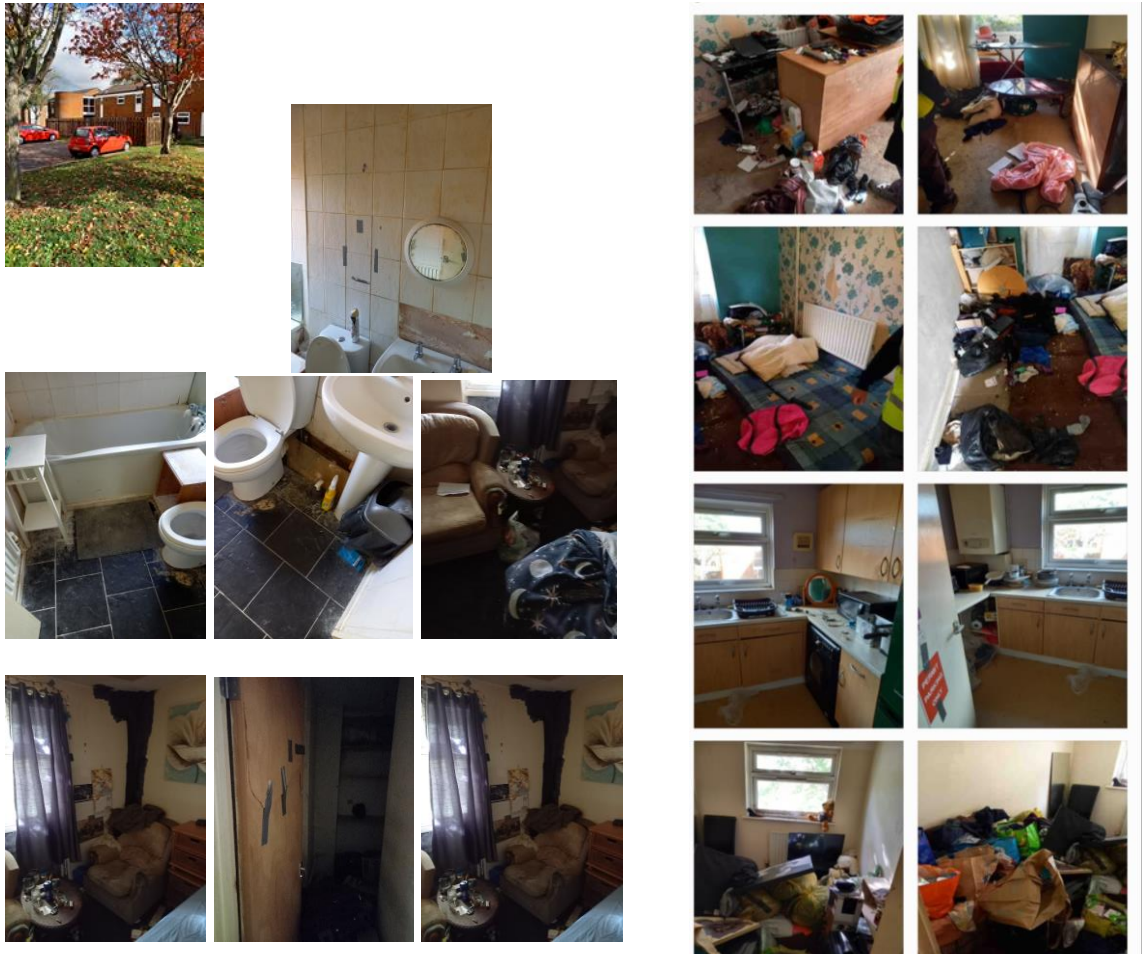
Void Property No.1 in the Roebuck Ward
Void Property No.2 in the Bedwell Ward and
Void Property No.3 in the Martinswood Ward

Present:

Councillors: Stephen Booth, and Julie Ashley-Wren
Officers: Tracy Jackson, Housing Supply Manager, Housing and Investment; Kamal Hulusi, Commercial and Contracts Manager Repairs and Voids; Andy Gore, Projects Officer, Stevenage Direct Services; Annabelle Wigann, Empty Homes Support Officer, Stevenage Direct Services; Lori Smith, Housing Options Case Worker, Housing & Investment and Stephen Weaver, Scrutiny Officer, Democratic Services.

Start Time: 1pm
End Time: 2.30pm

1. Void property no.1 – Roebuck Ward



The property in the Roebuck Ward had recently been handed to the Stevenage Direct Services Voids Team, the site visit was carried out before any work had commenced on the property. The property had been vacated by the tenant. The circumstances of how the property had become void was not clear. The property had been left in an untidy and damaged state, with broken doors and broken tiles in the bathroom. The previous tenant had left a lot of personal possession as well as litter in the property. The carpets were all damaged and would need to be removed. The property smelt very damp. There was a lot of work needed to bring the property back to a lettable state.

2. Void property no.2 – in Bedwell Ward

The property in the Bedwell Ward had undergone some work by the Stevenage Direct Services Voids Team, the site visit group were shown some print outs of photos of the property before any work had been carried out (these will be available to view at the meeting). The property had been left in a terrible condition with very large piles of rubbish at the side of the property and in the garden, including over 100 soiled nappies. The rubbish had all been cleared when viewed on the site visit. The property had been rat infested due to the poor condition the tenant had been living in. The family living at the property had contained young children so there were child safeguarding issues that were apparent to the Members and officers at the site visit.

The property had suffered from a first-floor flood in the bathroom which had damaged both the bathroom and the kitchen ceiling. The kitchen had been removed in preparation for a new one to be installed once the internal ceiling had been replaced. The toilet was in a poor state and would need to be replaced with likely some work needed in the bathroom. It appeared that some work had been carried out on the walls such as repairs to the plaster work. Once all the repairs were carried out the property would be a sound 3-bedroom property. However, Members were of the view that the level of decorating to be carried out before it was returned to a lettable standard was likely to be a minimal standard.



3. Void property no.3 – Martinswood Ward

The property in the Martinswood Ward was very close to being signed off by Stevenage Direct Services Voids Team. Members were of the view that although the property was brought back to a lettable standard having been in state of major disrepair because of the behaviour of the former tenant, similar to the other two properties, the level of decoration was minimal and therefore left an impression of not being complete.



4. Other comments made by Members

(i) It was commented that regular visits to the properties should be carried out to avoid them getting into such a terrible state. This could highlight problems to all relevant SBC departments and other public sector bodies and save the Council money in the long run by not having to carry out such extensive cleaning and repairs to the property if the tenant was warned about their care of the property before it reached such a terrible state.

(ii) Members asked how indicative as a percentage of void properties per year/month/week were the examples that Members were shown?

(iii) Was the low level of decoration on completed void properties not encouraging better behaviour with tenants or would it just be a waste of money if the tenant's lifestyle was so chaotic that the property would be bound to be left in such a poor state when they know there is no real consequences for their behaviour other than eviction?

5. Written note from Cllr Julie Ashley-Wren who attended the site visit

Thank you all for giving up your time yesterday to allow us to visit the three void properties.

It is shocking how people are living particularly when little children are part of the equation.

For me I think it highlights the need for regular inspections to all council properties. Unfortunately, so many professionals are no longer visiting children for health check-ups including Speech & language. The NHS and Social Care are really struggling so many issues are not being addressed and people who could manage to live independently with support are just not able to cope.

I think that we must address the issue of properties going under the radar and being vacated without SBC's knowledge. It is a travesty that other families are living in inadequate accommodation while properties are lying empty, for in some cases a year. This must have financial issues for the SBC including being required to pay the Council tax on these properties, that becomes 150% of the amount when a property has been empty for 6 months I believe.

It was clear yesterday that some of the properties are in a disgusting state when they become voids. I totally appreciate the team for all of their hard work in clearing and rectifying the properties. I am however concerned that delays in the turnaround of properties is due to a lack of staff in the in-house team. Surely to resolve this we should be outsourcing if we can't increase the number of in-house staff.

We need to make these properties available as a matter of urgency. Our families need us to up our game to support them with appropriate accommodation.

I do feel that we should consider ensuring that our accommodation matches the expectation of quantity of private rentals. If people move into a well decorated house/flat tenant they will have a better understanding of the expected standard of care of SBC properties.

Thank you all again
Julie