

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 11 October 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 and Wendy Kerby

Start / End Start Time: 6:00 pm

Time: End Time: 7:25 pm

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

There were no apologies for absence received.

There were no declarations of Interest.

2 MINUTES - 5 SEPTEMBER 2022

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of Community Select Committee meeting held on Monday 5 September 2022 be approved as correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 DRAFT SCOPING DOCUMENT – VOIDS SCRUTINY REVIEW

The Chair introduced the draft scoping document to the Committee. The Chair summarised what the focus of the review would be on:

- To look at the current issues and challenges facing Housing Investment and Direct Service officers in making void properties ready for let
- To identify ways to improve the current service including, where possible, reducing the time to carry out works in the property before it is relet
- To re-engineer the letting process
- To better define the thresholds for standard voids and major voids
- To review the lettable standard
- To benchmark with like-for-like “family group” or similar composition local authorities who retain a housing stock

The Chair said she wanted to see a laser focus on what were the current problems with void properties and what made them difficult to turnaround and bring back to a lettable standard. The Chair was looking for the review to come forward with some practical recommendations that the Executive and officers can implement to improve the void service.

The Chair invited comment on the scoping document and highlighted the following issues:

Staffing issues

The Chair asked officers to update the Committee on staffing issues covering pay, terms and conditions and recruitment and retention issues in Stevenage Direct Service. Consideration of staffing issues is not just about pay as that is also considered in the context of work life balance, distance of commute, pension contribution, sick pay; which in a cost-of-living crisis can all impact on employment decisions. The Chair is keen for the review to consider remuneration aspects if these are factors that are affecting performance / capacity, such as a bonus system. The Assistant Director, Steve Dupoy, stated that they were also working with Human Resources, looking at the pay and remuneration package as there were shortages of skilled workers in what is a buoyant construction sector. In some instances, agency staff were being used, but this was a costly option and not something that is sustainable in the long term.

The Operations Director, Rob Gregory informed Members that an Empty Homes Co-ordinator post had been created. The post holder would take on the ownership and coordination for the end-to-end processes, to help towards synergising and optimising the voids service.

Members raised the issue that vacancies in SDS that are advertised on the Council's website do not come up under search engines such as Google, which many people use as a mechanism to search for jobs. The Chair suggested also advertising SDS jobs in the windows in the reception area. The issue of utilising apprenticeships was also raised, but a Member cautioned that this is not a panacea as there was a danger in recruiting apprentices if there was not a good level of staffing to train them which results in them staying low skilled and just being used as cheap labour. The flipside to this is, if they are well trained, there was a likelihood they leave for a better paid job in the industry. Officers stated that they would give this some further consideration and that the Strategic Leadership Team had recently discussed utilising the apprenticeship levy to see if there were opportunities that could be explored.

Re-engineering the letting process

Regarding re-engineer of the letting process, the Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that the legal standard would clearly be maintained as a minimum. In connection with this there was a Government review nationally of the Decent Homes Standard. Consultation on the Decent Homes standard had been finally published in early September and was open until the 14 October 2022. Currently the Stevenage Decent Homes standard is higher than the statutory standard, but the new national Decent Homes standard will likely be higher which will have implications on the Housing Revenue Account, so there will likely be issues regarding its affordability. Officers are hoping to receive the information on the new standard by the end of December 2022.

The Chair asked officers to consider a scenario where it might be better for a

potential new tenant to go into a vacant property once statutory safety checks are completed rather than waiting further weeks until the property meets the lettable standard, as they may be in urgent need of being re-housed following a private tenancy eviction? Tracy Jackson acknowledged that it would be helpful to know early in the process if new tenant was likely to turn the property down.

Members asked Officers to find out the number of private rented evictions there were in the Stevenage housing market. Tracy Jackson advised that the council only had knowledge of those who approached our Housing Options Service and agreed to circulate this information to Members.

The Chair asked Members and Officers to explore the issue of allowing new tenants to take access of the property so long as the minimum standards of health and safety are maintained. Officers could then enter the property and carry out other minor fixes when the tenant is in the property. A member stated that they were concerned with this approach, as it could take the pressure off the Council and the tenant could be left with problems in their property.

The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that the Council has a legal responsibility to carry out electrical and gas safety inspections prior to new tenants taking on a lease as part of the existing Decent Homes standard. Issues like the quality of the kitchen and bathroom are covered by the Stevenage Decent Homes standard. Small aesthetic works could be carried out once a new tenant is in the property if that helps the tenant be housed quicker, but any major repairs would need to be done prior to a new tenancy.

Improved definitions between major and minor repairs

The review would need to address a demarcation between a major or minor repair. This needs to be better defined and broken down to clearer categories.

Benchmarking

A member asked what is meant by the need for more appropriate benchmarking as suggested in the scoping document? Cllr John Duncan suggested that the Council currently benchmarks with a national set of data via Housemark. The shortcomings of this benchmarking group are that this group may not be comparable to the housing stock in SBC. If the Council could find a more similar group of authorities / registered social landlords, it would add more value to officers in the sharing of best practise and ideas as well as performance.

The Chair asked if officers could consider using a void property to see what changes could be made to make it address climate change such as improved insulation/heat pumps etc. as the new Decent Homes standard will drive this, and the Council needs to be in a position to know what measures work best?

The Chair encouraged Members to look at what other authorities were doing with regard to housing in view of modular properties or reuse of existing housing.

The Chair shared with the Committee some other thoughts she had which she was

keen that the review should consider these included:

Exploring other options including pod style accommodation

Can officers consider a modular pod type simple accommodation (such as converted shipping containers or new build flat pack prefabricated one or two storey buildings), if we own plots of land that could be connected to utilities? A member suggested that 108 Oaks Cross would be a good example to look at as converted containers. Perhaps the new tenants of this accommodation should be asked what their view is? Tracy Jackson stated that a visit has been arranged for 24 October at 4pm if the Chair wished to attend? Where these have been used elsewhere, they are a cheap and effective option for housing and are well insulated so low energy to run.

Improved communications

The Chair raised the case that had been reported in the Comet newspaper that had raised a lot of angst regarding a tenant that had moved from London and had complained about the state of the property they were moved into it. The context is that this has angered people on the waiting list that can't get a property, who don't understand Statutory direct lets that the Council needs to accommodate, who are in category A.

The Chair raised this issue as she felt that there was a need for some clear messaging to be sent out from the Council on this issue, to help explain it to the public, with perhaps an article in the Chronicle and the use of social media to share accurate information on this issue. This could address the issue of lowering expectations of the Council, with older generations believing that it should be possible to house younger people, whereas the whole housing market has radically changed since the building of the new town. A Member cautioned that it would be very difficult to easily explain the Housing Allocations Policy. It might be more successful to inform the public on the numbers of stock such as circa 3,000 3 bed houses and the average tenancy is 12 years that would give the public an idea of the scale of the problem. The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that although allocations wasn't in the direct scope of the review it was a related issue and the Community Select Committee would be invited to a Portfolio Holder Advisory Group later in the municipal year to look at a revised allocations policy, this would be accompanied by a wide public consultation on the issue.

Analysis of reasons for termination of tenancies

The Chair asked why are people leaving their accommodation? Some of the reasons can be forced evictions due to anti-social behaviour of the tenant. The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, confirmed that people leave their accommodation for a variety of reasons including ASB, death of the tenant, change of circumstances household family composition changes. The Operations Director offered to provide some in-depth analysis around the statistics and reasons for why people leave their accommodation and terminate their tenancies. A Member asked what happens to succession rights, which are often complicated to resolve? The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that they all needed to be looked at on a case-by-case basis governed by the law. The Operations Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson

stated that we have secured tenancies, so it is different to the world of private landlords and tenants. The Council employs a Downsizing officer who would make an approach to older underoccupied tenants to see if they would consider a more suitable property. The Council can assist with removals as older people are often daunted with the huge upheaval of moving and the new dwelling needs to meet their needs but if the tenant refuses to move there is nothing that can be done.

The stress on the system comes from a high demand for property whilst stock remains void and also a loss of income to the Council.

The Chair raised the issue of tenant swaps and shared the example of an older resident who is not inclined to leave the 3 bed family home, although her children are now all adults and have left the home. In the same area there are families living in 1 or 2 bed flats with multiple children. The Chair asked if it is possible to have a fair and compassionate system that works for all? Is it right for the single older person to not have to consider moving to a smaller property to house the family so long as mitigations can be considered? The Chair shared the example of a former Housing Portfolio Holder who used to hold events akin to “speed dating” to try and match up prospective tenants to swap their properties which would formally be understood as a mutual exchange. A member cautioned that there can be unintended consequences if large groups of older people move out of larger accommodation to smaller units as this can stop the natural organic supply of this housing and make it very difficult for new generations coming into the social housing market.

Incentives for tenants to look after the property

The Chair asked if as part of the review officers could explore the issue of offering some incentives to tenants to look after their property. Can a deposit scheme be considered, perhaps £1 or £2 a week that could be accrued (to a maximum financial cut off point) as part of the rent over the life of the tenancy that could be given back to the tenant if the property is left to a standard re cleaning/decoration etc.? This would help reduce the cost to the Council and provide the tenant with a small deposit that would help them in their new dwelling when they move, if they do not leave it to the agreed standard this money could be a contribution for repairs and cleaning required in the property when they vacate the property. Coupled with this could be a more regular inspection regime that could warn the tenant that they could lose their accrued deposit.

The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, stated that this would definitely be worth looking at, currently tenancies audits are done by the residents and estates team, whose time is spent chasing rent arrears and looking at ASB issues, so a look at how the teams time could be freed up to look at tenancy audits would be really beneficial, and would mean the team can nip issues in the bud that left alone become much bigger issues to deal with and gives officers greater leverage when the property is handed over to the voids team to determine what needs to be done in the property.

The Chair asked how many people were currently being housed in hotels? The Operations Manager – Providing Homes, Tracy Jackson, advised that the use of

hotels for temporary accommodation has been significantly reduced as more accommodation has been made available via our Housing Development team. She agreed to bring back some figures to the Committee on this.

The Chair asked is the current SBC new build social housing stock finish of the Housing Development team too high a standard compared with the standard of the old stock? This matter would be picked up when the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development was interviewed by the Committee in November. The Operations Director, Rob Gregory, said that this would need to be looked at as part of any future HRA business plan to balance the investment on the existing stock with the investment of the new stock. This is linked to the current asset management strategy, with an ageing original stock that is needing significant investment coupled with the pressures of retrofitting the stock to be net zero carbon to meet the demands of climate change there will need to be some difficult decisions about where the priorities are for both existing stock and new build.

4 **MAPPING EXERCISE DOCUMENT FOR HOUSING VOIDS REVIEW**

Members noted that the site visits to three void properties would be carried out on Thursday 13 October, and it was hoped that the visits would give those Members who attended it a better understanding of the challenges that face the Council when addressing voids.

A member expressed concern that there was a limited time to conduct all of the elements of the review that was left to do. In response the Chair suggested that individual Members on the Committee do their own “homework” and do their own desk top research with other new towns such as Crawley, Basildon and Harlow who have similar housing stock. The Chair stated that the Committee would endeavour to complete the review in the time allotted and the Operations Director was keen to come up with practical recommendations and make improvements to the performance on void properties.

It was noted that the Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing & Housing Development would be invited to attend the Committee’s next meeting on 2 November 2022 to discuss Housing Voids.

It was **RESOLVED** that the Mapping Exercise Document for the Housing Voids Review be noted.

5 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

6 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Note required.

7 URGENT PART II BUSINESS

CHAIR