

**Meeting:** COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE

Portfolio Area: Housing & Housing Development

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**DRAFT 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 consider the report and recommendations of the Community Select Committee Scrutiny, looking at the performance of void properties within the Council's housing stock.

**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 on 3 occasions in total with 3 formal Committee meetings to undertake the review as follows: On 5 September 2022, 11 October 2022 and 2 November 2022, and held 2 site visits days on 13 October to visit 3 properties at various stages of the void process at properties in Roebuck, Bedwell and Martinswood and a revisit on 2 November 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 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.

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 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 Chair is keen for officers to explore opportunities for ways to incentivise tenants to maintain and leave their properties in a reasonable state of repair without piles of rubbish and discarded personal possessions, which is often currently the case. This could be in the form of a financial incentive scheme (at the level of £100 if it is left up to the required standard) or in the form of a disincentive, such as a penalty fee or delay/ban in transferring to an alternative SBC property. Members are aware that this may be of limited impact, especially for tenants who simply abandon the property.

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.

4.9 **Recommendation 8 – Undertake a review of the lettable standard**

4.9.1 Members found that the current lettable standard is too low. Members are therefore recommending that there be a review of the lettable standard. Members recognise that there would likely be cost implications to this recommendation, but this can be considered as part of the wider revision of the HRA Business Plan.

**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**