

STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

**COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE
MINUTES**

Date: Tuesday, 14 November 2023

Time: 6.00pm

Place: Council Chamber, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage

Present: Councillors: Sarah Mead (Chair), Alex Farquharson (Vice Chair), Julie Ashley-Wren, Forhad Chowdhury, John Duncan, Wendy Kerby, Conor McGrath, Ellie Plater and Carolina Veres

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

1 APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST

Apologies for absence were submitted on behalf of Councillor Mason Humberstone.

There were no declarations of interest.

2 MINUTES - THURSDAY 19 OCTOBER 2023

It was **RESOLVED** that the minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 19 October 2023 be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

3 PRESENTATION ON THE FINDINGS OF THE RIDGE REVIEW

The Committee received a presentation from the Assistant Director, Building Safety and Housing Property Services on the recently published Ridge Independent Housing Speciality Review of Stevenage Housing Services, focussing on the repairs element of the Council.

The Assistant Director outlined the approach of the Review which included 25 consultation meetings with stakeholders and frontline teams, observation of frontline service on-site – repairs, Planning and Customer Service Centre teams, alongside a review of processes, data and information.

The Committee was advised that the key findings of the review were that:

- significant improvements had been made to systems and working practices since the pandemic but that there was a lack of transparency in the data quality;
- a lack of documented processes; and
- policy and procedures and improvements were urgently needed to communication and customer engagement which was currently the root cause of customer complaints

The Assistant Director outlined the strengths and achievements of the service highlighted in the review including the reduction in service backlog, the new scheduling system providing real-time insights, the new booking hub and enhanced collaboration and aligning work with repair planners and supervisors to give clear accountabilities of the service

The Committee noted a number of opportunities from the review including engaging with customers to shape the new service model and the use of technology to become a digital business.

The key recommendations from the review in relation to the Service; people; systems and technology and data and information were outlined to Members. The existing data and information currently held would be used in a more intelligent fashion.

Members raised a number of concerns and questions which were responded to by the Assistant Director and the Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development:

- The stakeholders involved in the consultation included all front line teams who had an interface with the repairs service;
- In relation to the booking hub, Members were advised that this was currently under development but that it was envisaged that a customer could report a repair and make an appointment at the same time. Members were concerned that this was likely to cause issues with customers mis-diagnosing an issue and the wrong operatives being sent out to a property. Officers assured Members that a team of planners and schedulers that would review the report to consider the most appropriate operative to be sent out. It was agreed that this issue should be re-considered by the Committee once the booking hub was operational;
- Several Members of the Committee had been on site visits with the Repairs team and concern was expressed that both jobs attended had failed due to the inadequacy of communication between departments;
- A Member advised that in order for the system to be successful, it was essential that the Schedule of Rates for the works be accurate and reflect the different tasks/repairs regarding the time allocated to the Direct Labour organisation's trades person;
- Members were concerned that the reference to upskilling operatives to take on additional tasks would result in less expertise in one trade. The Assistant Director gave assurances that operatives would still be skilled in a primary trade but would be able to take associated simple/lower level jobs if they were needed. She advised that this was a common practice within the repairs sector.

The Assistant Director advised the Committee that following the review, an all-encompassing improvement plan would be established and involve all stakeholders including customers. There would hopefully be some quick wins as well as realistic milestones and target dates for those improvements to ensure they were deliverable within available resources.

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

4 **INTERVIEW WITH THE EXECUTIVE PORTFOLIO HOLDER FOR HOUSING & HOUSING DEVELOPMENT**

The Chair welcomed Councillor Jeannette Thomas, Executive Portfolio Holder for Housing and Housing Development to the meeting.

Councillor Thomas advised that she was aware that the majority of Councillor contact with tenants was housing repair related. She advised the Committee that the Repairs and the Investment Teams were now working together and that the situation with repairs had improved. Any new reports would be dealt with in good time and historical repairs were being worked through by the Team.

Councillor Thomas agreed with Members and the Assistant Director that communication with tenants was key to making the new way of working a success. Even if there was no progress, tenants must be kept informed with the situation in regard to their repair.

In response to a question, Councillor Thomas advised that the detail of the issue in the majority of reports from tenants was identified correctly but the diagnosis of the work required to an issue was undertaken by the repair's operatives.

In response to a further question from the Chair regarding what happened to the cases which were initially being dealt with by the repair team but were deemed not to be a repair, when these cases appeared to close, Councillor Thomas responded by saying that she did not know what the referral route to the investment team is in those cases. The Chair asked the Portfolio holder to clarify.

The Chair stated that the review had established that there was a difference between what constituted a repair and what was a replace.

The Chair thanked Councillor Thomas for her contribution to the meeting.

5 **RESPONSE TO QUESTION MEMBERS RAISED REGARDING RE-CHARGING TENANTS FOR DAMAGED PROPERTIES**

The Committee received a report from the Scrutiny Officer outlining the response to information requested by Members regarding re-chargable costs to tenants for damage to properties.

Members agreed that early inspections of properties were important to ensure there were no delays for any potential re-charges. Members were pleased to hear that it was planned to increase regular tenancy audits which were key to avoid any issues.

The Assistant Director gave reassurances to the Committee that the procedure was due for a review early in the new Year.

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

6 **URGENT PART 1 BUSINESS**

None.

7 **EXCLUSION OF PUBLIC AND PRESS**

Not required.

8 **.URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

CHAIR