

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

**Date: Monday 8 January 2018**

**Place: Shimkent Room, Daneshill House, Danestrete, Stevenage**

**Present:** Councillors: S Mead (Chair), M Notley (Vice-Chair), J Brown, E Connolly, E Harrington, J Lloyd, J Mead, A Mitchell CC, C Saunders and G Snell

**In Attendance:** J Cresser (Assistant Director – Housing & Investment), M Levi-Smythe (Graduate – HR & Organisational Development), W Oglina (Empty Homes Manager)

**Start and End Time:** Start Time: 6:00 pm  
End Time: 8:00 pm

### **1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE AND DECLARATIONS OF INTEREST**

There were no apologies for absence or declarations of interest.

### **2. MINUTES – 1 NOVEMBER 2017**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 1 November 2017, be approved as a correct record and signed by the Chair subject to the following amendment:

Item 3: Sustainable Transformation Plans - Page 4 Paragraph 4 to read:

“In reply to a further question, it was confirmed that dental services, along with GP surgeries, would be included within the scope of the STP’s activities which would also include all aspects of NHS operations including provision of medicines and back-room services.”

### **3. HOUSING ALL UNDER ONE ROOF**

The Committee received a presentation by the Council’s Assistant Director for Housing & Investment, Jaine Cresser, on the “Housing All Under One Roof” programme and the reorganisation of its Housing and Investment Business Unit.

The presentation covered an update on the current status of the programme, and in particular, touched upon the business vision, knowing customers (Big Knock), service and personal development and digital housing. The Members were informed that the Council had purchased four additional modules of the Northgate housing management system. The modules would improve case management, capture more housing-related information and enable a consistent approach to handling customer

queries. The Assistant Director informed the Members that Health Checks were being carried out to ensure that the database was utilised to full capacity and that there would be no disconnect between Housing & Investment and Customer Services.

The Committee was informed that the Housing & Investment team was encouraging customers to use the self-service facility. This was aimed at re-assigning the extra resources to focus on assisting customers who were unable to access online services.

The Members were informed that the main issues raised by residents during the Big Knock were repairs, investment in new homes and the need for regular and up-to-date communication between the Council and residents. The Assistant Director reported that the team was now collating and analysing information gathered during the Big Knock. The Committee was informed that the Housing Operations Manager posts for Providing Homes, Managing Homes and Investing in homes and properties had now been filled.

Members asked a number of questions in relation to the job descriptions of the Housing Operations Manager posts, the current organisational structure of the Housing & Investment team and whether officers had provided feedback on their view of the transformation plans.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- the presentation be noted
- the Housing All Under One Roof programme be revisited in a year to see what progress had been made with the transformation plans
- the Assistant Director provide the Committee with job descriptions for the new Housing Operations Manager posts and the new structure of the Housing & Investment team

#### **4. DRAFT HOUSING ALLOCATIONS REVIEW REPORT**

The Committee considered a draft report by the Council's Scrutiny Officer, which detailed the recommendations of its scrutiny review into the Council's Housing Allocations Policy, as part of the Committee's Work Programme for 2017/2018.

The Committee considered the draft report and recommendations of the scrutiny review into the Housing Allocation Policy. The Committee was informed that the draft recommendations had been presented to the Customer Scrutiny Panel for comments.

Officers responded to questions raised by Members in relation to:

- policy regarding under-occupiers and key workers
- incentives to down-size
- the aim of the exercise of converting some current hard to let studio apartment blocks to one bed flats

- details communicated to unsuccessful bidders

Members highlighted the fact that staff did not always follow guidance regarding advice to tenants moving properties. It was also acknowledged that tenants with literacy needs, language problems or limited access to online services required more support from staff.

With regard to recommendation 2, the Empty Homes Manager indicated that statistics concerning under 35s could be collated from other teams such as Income and Tenancy.

In response to a question, the Empty Homes Manager confirmed that incentives to downsize were offered in some cases and that it was not Council policy not to approve downsizing applications for those with rent arrears. The Committee was also informed that there was no priority for under-occupiers in the current Allocations Policy.

The Empty Homes Manager informed the Committee that his team used its discretion in some local connection appeal cases. Members were informed that it would be ideal not to communicate bid results to unsuccessful bidders.

It was indicated that it was hard to let sheltered accommodation because of the kitchen sizes and the preference of two-bedroom properties by some elderly couples. It was noted that officers had already started converting some hard to let studio apartments in line with the recommendation. The aim of this exercise was to make the properties lettable and ultimately reduce the voids.

The Chair raised concerns that there were cases of new tenants moving into properties before gas checks had been carried out. This practice could create health and safety issues.

It was **RESOLVED** that:

- Recommendation 1 be amended to reflect that staff training needed to be adhered to and more support should be provided to tenants with literacy needs or language problems
- Recommendation 2 to consider the provision of shared accommodation for the under 35s, who would be impacted by the Housing Benefit Cap be included in the report
- The Empty Homes Manager submit to the Committee the statistics about under 35s likely to be affected by the Housing Benefit Cap
- Recommendation 3 be amended to include a review of the Bands to identify customers wishing to downsize and that when a move is possible, a realistic timeframe be established
- the reference to Great Ashby in the Recommendation 4 be deleted
- the Empty Homes Manager check the status of key workers regarding local connection rights and circulate a response to Members
- Recommendation 5 be retained to help monitor progress and for

- future review of the recommendations
- Officers liaise with Members and revisit the terminology used in all forms of communication with bidders
- Officers should arrange a campaign to improve communication with bidders and manage expectations in a transparent manner
- officers stop automatically informing housing bidders where their bid was within the top 50 bids
- in all cases of a new tenancy, an up-to-date gas check be completed on the property before the new tenant is offered the property
- comments be noted and incorporated into the final recommendations.

**5. URGENT PART I BUSINESS**

None

**6. EXCLUSION OF THE PRESS AND PUBLIC**

Not required

**7. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**