

# STEVENAGE BOROUGH COUNCIL

## COMMUNITY SELECT COMMITTEE MINUTES

**Date: Wednesday 7 February 2018**

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

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

**In Attendance:** M Levi-Smythe (Graduate – HR & Organisational Development), D Panter (Mechanical and Electrical (M & E) Compliance Manager) and W Oglina (Empty Homes Manager)

**Start and End Time:** Start Time: 6:00 pm  
End Time: 7:40 pm

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

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors J Brown, E Connolly and C Saunders.

There were no declarations of interest.

### **2. MINUTES – 8 JANUARY 2018**

It was **RESOLVED** that the Minutes of the meeting of the Community Select Committee held on 8 January 2018 are agreed as a correct record and signed by the Chair.

### **3. HOUSING ALLOCATIONS REVIEW – FINAL REPORT**

The Scrutiny Officer informed Members that some of the papers for the meeting were being tabled, including responses to questions that Members had raised at the last meeting. Members expressed concern regarding the late submission of these papers and said that such a practice was not acceptable as it affected their preparations for meetings.

The Chair informed Members that the purpose of the review was to provide the Community Select Committee's input to the wider officer and Executive Portfolio Holder review of the Housing Allocations Policy.

With regard to Recommendation 5, Members sought clarification on the timescale for converting properties, living arrangements for families in properties earmarked for conversion and the design specifications of converted bedsits – particularly the position of windows - and requested a site visit to one of these schemes to see the before and after

transformation.

It was noted that there were myths about housing allocation and that these were not helped by a complicated policy and prospective bidders often not reading or understanding the available guidance. Members highlighted that future communication campaigns for the Housing Allocations Policy should be user-friendly and should include audio and visual methods.

With regard to Recommendation 7, it was confirmed that there were very few queries from bidders who wanted to find out their positions on respective bids. Members were informed that the majority of the queries were received from bidders who had been on the waiting list for a long period and who sought clarification on why their bids were not successful. The Empty Homes Manager stated that bidders were able to check their bid positions using the online self-service facility.

Members agreed that more needed to be done to manage the expectations of bidders. It was noted that there was no guidance on possible waiting times for each Band.

With regard to Recommendation 8, the Mechanical & Electrical (M.E.) Compliance Manager acknowledged that it was good practice to complete an up-to-date gas check on the property before a new tenant moves in and the gas to be approved and fully working prior to the tenant moving in. Members were informed that such a practice created a financial risk for the Council and provided few benefits for the new tenant. The M & E Compliance Manager outlined the council practice of capping gas supply as soon as a tenant moves out and supplies being restored within 24 hours of a new tenant contacting their preferred supplier. Members were informed that the main issue was having sufficient gas credit during the property transfer stage. This could have a financial cost to the Council if it were to adopt the Committee's recommendation.

Members agreed that circumstances of individual tenants should be taken into consideration and that new tenants should be given the option to have a fully working boiler at the point of their moving in and if this incurred a cost that the tenant be given the option to pay for this. Members expressed that their expectation is that boilers and heating be in fully working order on the first day of the tenancy particularly in view of the tenants either having children or wanting to decorate and fit carpets where a damp atmosphere is not suitable. Members also posed questions regarding timescales between a new tenant accepting the tenancy and the move in date. The Empty Homes Manager confirmed that under normal circumstances a tenancy started at the beginning of the week and it was highly unlikely that new tenants would be expected to start their tenancy on a Friday (or during the weekend).

Members highlighted a case that involved a tenant moving into a property that was in severe disrepair and had a faulty boiler. The M & E Compliance Manager confirmed that he was aware that the tenant had moved during

the weekend. The M & E Compliance Manager informed Members that this was a rare case given that it was one of just two incidents out of 800 properties that are capped annually.

Members sought clarification on audit arrangements for gas checks and the state of properties that still used solid fuel systems. In response to Members questions, the M & E Compliance Manager indicated that a third party was responsible for auditing gas safety checks. It was confirmed that information packs for new tenants included a recommendation that gas and electric cookers be fitted by qualified personnel. The M & E Compliance Manager brought to the attention of Members the arrangement by Nottingham City Homes to engage Energy Angels as a partner to advise tenants on energy price comparison.

Members noted that not all aspects of the review's scoping document had been addressed, such as the allocation of lead Member roles. However, the Chair stated that she was content that the key issues identified in the scoping document had been addressed within the review.

It was **RESOLVED** that the final report and recommendations be agreed with the following additions and amendments:

- Recommendation 3 be amended to “Priority should be given to under occupiers wishing to downsize their properties and to co-ordinate with over occupiers, with a review of the Bands to identify customers wishing to downsize and that when a move is possible, a realistic timeframe be established.”
- Recommendation 5 be amended to “That officers make alternative and improved use of hard to let sheltered accommodation that will have a positive impact on the current voids situation whilst maintaining suitable living standards.”
- Recommendation 7 be amended to include “That officers should stop the current practise of automatically informing bidders where their bid was within the top 50 bids, and that a narrative be used on the bidding website to explain the scenarios that are likely to result in multiple unsuccessful bids over a long period of time.”
- Recommendation 8 be amended to “In all cases of a new tenancy, an up-to-date gas check be completed on the property before the new tenant moves in and the gas to be approved and fully working prior to the tenant moving in. In the instances that a ‘one-off’ exception occurs, the tenant should be offered a suitable reduction in rent for the duration of not having a working gas supply.”
- An additional recommendation that officers publish an annual statement detailing allocations per band as a percentage of total allocations.
- An additional recommendation that officers to consider engaging a third party energy comparison partner such as Energy Angels to help tenants get the best energy deal.

#### 4. URGENT PART I BUSINESS

None

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

Not required

**6. URGENT PART II BUSINESS**

None.

**CHAIR**