

CALL TO ACCOUNT ON THE HARKNESS COURT REFURBISHMENT - 7 November 2023

REPORT OF THE VICE CHAIR 2023-24

I thank Steve Crowley, Service Director – Enterprise and Nafees Parker, Building Surveyor, who were in attendance to provide their account, and Members of the Overview and Scrutiny committee who asked incisive questions.

The Service Director – Enterprise presented their report entitled 'Call to account on the Harkness Court Refurbishment', and advised that:

- The aim was to revert Harkness Court back into residential use, as four flats, from its current use as offices.
- The start date for refurbishment was delayed from 2018 to August 2020, the building work had been completed, however, there were a number of additional items that needed to be undertaken to enable it to be rented out. This work was scheduled to complete by the start of February 2024.
- The lack of a formal project or project manager in place, plus changes in personnel at Stevenage Borough Council and North Herts Council combined with the impact of Covid, had caused delays in starting this project.
- Another delay was complying with the requirement to ensure that the furthest point a fire engine can park from the building was no more than 45 metres. This was part of the previously mentioned work that needed to be undertaken.
- On completion Harkness Court would be leased out to rent by Broadwater Hundred Property Management Ltd, a trading company wholly owned by the Council which would provide a revenue income of £16,000 per year.

This project was in Councillor Levett's portfolio as part of the Conservative administration at the beginning of the project in 2018 then progressed under the Joint Administration until completion in 2024. It is clear that the project was started without clear project management and that it continued to be viewed as a small project that didn't need reviewing.

The main findings of the Call to Account concerned the requirement for each project to have:

- a named project manager at the beginning of each new project.
- clear identification of each project's scope.
- a detailed risk assessment.
- on-going agile project management using project software.
- understanding of Building Control requirements.
- a capital budget set at an independent project level to aid financial transparency.
- trained and experienced project managers at the Council to manage any contract.
- consistent staffing throughout its course.

There has been a positive response to the 'Lessons learned' document from the Service Director – Enterprise who has recently updated me on progress with meeting these concerns.

Cllr Val Bryant

Vice-Chair of Overview & Scrutiny Committee, May 2024