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|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|---------------------------------|
| Item No. 21. | Classification: Open | Date: 22 July 2014 | Meeting Name: Cabinet |
| Report title: | | Review of Void Disposal Strategy | |
| Ward(s) or groups affected: | | All | |
| Cabinet Member: | | Councillor Richard Livingstone, Housing | |

FOREWORD – COUNCILLOR RICHARD LIVINGSTONE, CABINET MEMBER FOR HOUSING

In March 2009, the then executive of the council established a strategy and criteria for selling certain council void properties to help fund the housing investment programme. These criteria were reviewed and refined in 2011 to better meet the objectives of the strategy.

With the significant increase in London house prices, this is a sensible time to review the strategy and, in particular, the property value threshold in the criteria. This report recommends that this threshold is increased from £300,000 to £500,000 to reflect that change in property values and the requirements of the housing investment programme. The new criteria set out in paragraph 51 also make clear that the £500,000 valuation criterion on its own would not be sufficient to trigger a disposal – disposal would only follow if another of the criteria was also met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

That the cabinet:

1. Notes the progress of disposals of void housing properties since the last report to cabinet in May 2011.
2. Notes the continuing requirement to raise capital receipts for the housing investment programme, and the role of void disposals in providing a proportion of those receipts.
3. Notes the general increase in property values in Southwark since the review of 2011.
4. Agrees to revise the criteria for disposals in the void disposal strategy from those agreed by cabinet in May 2011, to those set out in paragraph 52 of this report, and specifically to increase the threshold for disposal of void properties valued at £300,000 to £500,000 with the additional proviso that such properties be backed by one further category.
5. Agrees a change in focus from the setting of an annual target for void disposals to an ongoing assessment of the resource requirements of the housing investment programme to be provided by void disposals.
6. Continues to delegate all disposal decisions in respect of the implementation of the policy to the head of property for disposals, but to increase this threshold from

£500,000 to £750,000 estimated value (subject to the constitutional changes that this will require), and agrees that the cabinet member for housing shall continue to monitor the process.

7. Notes the change in the strategy for delivering the Hidden Homes programme in January 2013.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

8. In March 2009 executive approved the following categories of properties for disposal to provide funding for the housing investment programme (HIP) and the delivery of Hidden Homes:
 - Bedsits, 1 and 2 bedroom properties located above the third floor if based within a block
 - Properties valued in excess of £400,000, irrespective of bed size
 - Leasehold units in blocks with a high percentage of leasehold properties, where additional sales can mean that the freehold can potentially be considered for disposal, either by leaseholder enfranchisement or direct sale
 - Listed residential properties, irrespective of bed size
 - Properties which are difficult to let
 - Prefabricated homes – due to their high level investment need
 - Properties that are uneconomical to repair.
9. The decision extended the disposal programme to include general void properties requiring repair costs of less than £10,000.
10. Following a review of the void disposal strategy in May 2011, cabinet agreed to amend the criteria to that outlined below:
 - Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, A & B, converted street flats above the ground floor, with a view to being able to sell the freehold interest of the house
 - Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, estate properties in a block above the third floor
 - Void properties valued over £300,000
 - Listed residential properties
 - Properties deemed uneconomic to repair
 - Flats in blocks or a house with an already high level of leaseholders, and where sale would potentially allow the disposal of the freehold
 - Prefabricated homes.
11. The decision agreed a maximum target of void disposals per year to be increased from 100 to 140 to help achieve a capital receipts target of £20m per year.
12. Cabinet agreed the May 2011 report noting that the strategy also provided for the retention of selected void 3 bed plus properties to meet the need for larger family homes based on individual merit and following review, alongside ground floor properties that meet medical needs or may be suitable for adaptation.
13. It was also agreed that that a monitoring report be provided on a quarterly basis for the then deputy leader and cabinet member for housing.
14. This report seeks to review the current void disposal strategy in light of the experience of the last 3 years and the general changes in circumstances including

the housing market in London and Southwark specifically.

15. From inception, the Hidden Homes programme has been funded from the HIP and in part capital receipts obtained from the sale of void properties. In January 2013 a decision was taken by the deputy leader and cabinet member for housing to merge the Hidden Homes programme into the Direct Delivery Programme, thus breaking the funding link between the Hidden Home programme and the sale of voids.

KEY ISSUES FOR CONSIDERATION

16. The council is committed to improving the condition of its housing stock to meet the decent homes standard and the “warm, dry, safe” policy. The purpose of the voids disposal strategy is to generate capital to assist the council in meeting its commitments and reduce the council’s long term liability.
17. A review of the council’s base position in delivery of the decent homes programme was completed in 2008 and identified the scale of the investment gap. This prompted the council to identify and consider further options to generate additional capital resources to help bridge this gap. Various options were considered and approved including the ad hoc disposal of empty homes (voids) alongside a more pro-active disposal of under-utilised land and other non residential buildings.
18. The ten year HIP from 2013/14 has a budget of £1,551m and expected available resources of £923m and therefore there remains a funding gap, which largely falls in 2016/17 and beyond. Further details are contained in the quarterly capital monitoring outturn report for 2013/14 and capital programme refresh for 2013/14-2023/24 being reported separately to this cabinet meeting.
19. The HIP has traditionally been composed of a proportion of capital receipts over a number of years, including void disposals and land disposals (generally from regeneration schemes). As noted in paragraph 15 above, the Hidden Homes programme was until recently linked to the sale of voids, but with officers exploring options for self financing a decision was taken to merge Hidden Homes with the Direct Delivery Programme for new council homes.
20. Receipts are not generally earmarked to specific schemes or projects and instead contribute to the delivery of the whole HIP; however any increase in resources would assist the current funding gap.
21. The Hidden Homes programme is currently funded through HIP, including a contribution of S106 in-lieu payments, Right to Buy (RTB) receipts and GLA ‘Building the Pipeline’ grant funding.
22. The review of the voids disposal strategy in May 2011 agreed the widening of the disposal categories to include more street properties to help increase receipts as an alternative to selling a larger amount of estate based stock. Over the previous 2 years, street properties had achieved higher values per property at auction than estate based stock. Since 2010/11 and 2013/14 only 8 properties sold have been on estates, equating to 8.5% of all void sales.
23. Whilst it is accepted that street properties generally attain a higher level of receipt than estate based properties and widening the disposal criteria in respect of street

properties would increase the pool of void properties for disposal, it was acknowledged that this would also result in the sale of more desirable larger family homes.

24. Over the two years, 2009/10 and 2010/11, the average council void disposal achieved £153,274 (based on 91 sales), however by the end of the last financial year 2013/14 this had risen to £540,219. The Market Trends Bulletin records a rise in property prices in Southwark of 27% since the last quarter of 2010/11 and the Right Move house price index shows a 36% increase for the borough over the same period.
25. As a way of increasing the number of disposals and therefore income stream, the May 2011 review of the void disposal strategy set a maximum target of 140 units per annum aimed to generate £20m a year. The figure of 140 disposals was considered the maximum that could be processed for sale per year without having an effect of reducing the overall value of Southwark voids at auction.
26. Despite being useful as an upper limit for the number of voids that could be sold, it was anticipated that the actual throughput of voids would need to build up gradually, and the May 2011 review of the void disposal strategy modelled this to show a more realistic increase in sales; increasing from 55 per disposals in 2011/12 to 75 in 2015/16. This is set out in Table 1 below.
27. As noted above, street properties have historically attracted a higher sale receipt than voids based on estates. Estate based voids tend to attract less interest from potential buyers, can be on higher floor levels and will attract service charges and S20 liabilities arising from planned investment; there is also the possibility that leasehold interests may have to be bought out in future estate regeneration schemes. This would suggest that the disposal strategy should focus solely on the disposal of void street properties since this would maximise receipts for the loss of fewer homes.
28. Due to the increase in property values in Southwark over the past 2 to 3 years, the previous criterion for inclusion in the disposal strategy - void properties valued over £300,000 - now covers most street properties of 2 bedrooms or more. It is therefore proposed to increase this to £500,000. This would lower the pool of void properties available for disposal but help focus on properties that maximise receipts, therefore requiring fewer properties to be sold overall. It is further proposed that the value criterion is used in conjunction with one of the other criteria when properties are considered for disposal.
29. In helping to ensure that the disposal of council homes remains a measure to provide additional capital receipts for the HIP, whilst at the same time minimising the general loss of council homes especially larger 3 bed plus family homes, it is proposed that the annual target for sales of void properties is tailored to the needs of the HIP at any given time. Capital receipts for the HIP are generated by a range of housing disposals including void sales. Changing the emphasis from disposing of empty homes to maximise receipts, to a more flexible approach, enables the HIP to benefit from void disposals as circumstances dictate.
30. The council's letting stock at the end of 2013/14 stood at 38,248 properties. Of this approximately 3,800 are street properties. The number of properties sold under Right to Buy (RTB) rules rose from 24 in 2011/12 to 94 in 2012/13. However, this was followed by a larger increase in 2013/14 when there were 250 RTB

completions; summarised in Table 2 below. The increase was largely due to the change in RTB rules introduced by the government in April 2012, when the maximum RTB discounts for London was raised to £100,000.

Review of progress to date

31. Housing properties becoming void are initially assessed for re-letting. In certain circumstances, they are considered for disposal under the agreed criteria. A property needs to be assessed and declared surplus to the council's requirements before a disposal process can start. The strategic director of housing approves a recommendation to dispose, once consideration has been given to the various relevant factors including leasehold implications and freeholder repairing obligations. The director of regeneration or the chief executive make the formal surplus declaration. The disposal process is administered by the head of property for all properties with an estimated disposal value of £500,000 or below. For properties valued above £500,000 cabinet approval is currently required to proceed with disposal.
32. As noted in paragraphs 25 & 26, whilst setting a target of 140 void sales per annum, the May 2011 Review of the Void Disposal Strategy modelled a more realistic increase in void sales, ranging from 55 in 2011/12 to 75 in 2015/16. Using an average sale value of £153,274, it was anticipated that £8,430,109 could be generated from 55 disposals in 2011/12, rising to £11,495,550 from 75 disposals in 2015/16.
33. As can be seen from Table 1, whilst 55 disposals were completed in 2011/12, the numbers dropped significantly over the following two years. Over the 3 year period to the end of 2013/14 only 86 voids were sold compared to the anticipated 180, but the total receipt over the 3 year period was close to that anticipated; so, less than half the anticipated numbers of voids were sold to achieve roughly the same receipt.

Table 1 – Comparison of actual sales against target

| May 2011 target sales | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | Total |
|-----------------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| 55 | £8,430,109 | | | |
| 60 | | £9,196,440 | | |
| 65 | | | £9,962,810 | |
| Total | 180 | | | £27,589,359 |

| Actual sales | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 | Total |
|--------------|-------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| 55 | £14,050,450 | | | |
| 15 | | £4,501,000 | | |
| 16 | | | £8,962,810 | |
| Total | 86 | | | £27,194,950 |

34. The average sale value achieved per void property has improved significantly since the May 2011 review. The average receipt per sale of £153,274, used in the May 2011 report, increased to £540,219 in 2013/14.
35. At the end of 2013/14 the council's total housing stock stood at 38,248, down 2.08% since 2010/11.

36. Table 2 below shows that in 2010/11 the number of void re-lets stood at 2050, amounting to 5.25% of the total letting stock at the end of the year. In 2013/14 the turnover was 1,509, representing 3.95% of the total council stock at the end of that year. This shows a fall in turnover since 2010/11.

Table 2 – Re-Lets & RTB sales compared to stock

| Year | Council stock | Re-lets | Re-lets as %age of stock | RTB sales |
|---------|---------------|---------|--------------------------|-----------|
| 2010/11 | 39,062 | 2050 | 5.25% | 23 |
| 2011/12 | 38,990 | 1774 | 4.55% | 24 |
| 2012/13 | 38,787 | 1844 | 4.75% | 94 |
| 2013/14 | 38,248 | 1509 | 3.95% | 250 |

37. The May 2011 review acknowledged that widening the disposal criteria would also result in the sale of more desirable larger family homes. Cabinet recommended the retention of selected void 3 bed plus properties to meet the need for larger family homes based on individual merit.
38. Some larger family homes, alongside properties deemed to be beneficial to retain due to demand for properties with either specific location or property characteristics, are repaired and re-let using the Major Voids budget. This budget has been set at £1m per annum and used to repair voids requiring works in excess of £10,000. All properties repaired under this programme are repaired to Decent Homes (WDS) standard, and most require new bathrooms and kitchens. In 2013/14 a small number of larger street properties considered for disposal were subsequently retained and refurbished.
39. In 2011/12, 8 properties were refurbished under the Major Voids contract, dropping to 7 properties in 2012/13. However, in 2013/14 there were 16 properties refurbished at an average cost of £34,000 per property.

Analysis of sales

40. The void disposal strategy has been in place since 2009. Table 3 below shows the overall number of referrals, sales and receipts accrued from 2010/11 to the end of 2013/14 financial year.

Table 3 – Referrals, Sales & Receipts per annum

| | 2010/11 | 2011/12 | 2012/13 | 2013/14 |
|--------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------|------------|
| No of referrals | 71 | 39 | 14 | 7 |
| No of sales | 58 | 55 | 15 | 16 |
| Total receipts | £11,157,700 | £14,050,542 | £4,501,000 | £8,643,500 |
| Average receipt per sale | £192,322 | £255,463 | £300,067 | £540,219 |

- Note: properties referred are not necessarily sold in the same financial year.
- 2010/11 figures shown are slightly different from the May 2011 review as all void sales for that year have been included here for consistency with the following years. In the May 2011 report, sales of major void street properties, those requiring more than £10,000 to repair, were not included.

41. A total number of 144 properties have been sold to date since 2010/11, generating a total capital receipt of £38,349,652.

42. Table 3 shows that both the number of referrals and the number of sales has decreased each year to well below the 140 per year maximum target. It also shows that receipts have fallen short of the target £20m per year, however average sales receipts have risen significantly from an average receipt per property of £192,322 in 2010/11 to an average of £540,219 in 2013/14.

43. Table 4 below shows a detailed breakdown of referrals, sales and receipts by disposal criteria.

Table 4 – Breakdown of referrals, sales and receipts per criterion

| Disposal Criteria | Number of referrals | Number of sales | Total receipt £ | Number of referrals | Number of sales | Total receipt £ | Number of referrals | Number of sales | Total receipt £ |
|--|---------------------|-----------------|-------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------|---------------------|-----------------|------------------|
| | 2011/ 12 | | | 2012/ 13 | | | 2013 /14 | | |
| Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, A & B, street flats above the ground floor, with a view to being able to sell the freehold interest. | 7 | 13 | 2,516,000 | 4 | 3 | 728,000 | 1 | 4 | 1,178,500 |
| Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, estate properties in a block above the third floor. | | 1 | 182,000 | | | | | | |
| Void properties valued over £300,000. | 18 | 13 | 5,700,732 | 7 | 6 | 2,507,000 | 3 | 11 | 7,120,000 |
| Listed residential properties. | 1 | 1 | 404,000 | | | | | | |
| Properties deemed uneconomic to repair. | 3 | 11 | 1,898,000 | 3 | 2 | 450,000 | 1 | | |
| Flats in blocks or a house with a high level of leaseholders, where sale would potentially allow the disposal of the freehold. | 9 | 16 | 3,349,720 | | 4 | 816,000 | 1 | 1 | 345,000 |
| Pre fabs – as per the pre fab strategy. | 1 | | | | | | 1 | | |
| Total | 39 | 55 | 14,050,452 | 14 | 15 | 4,501,000 | 7 | 16 | 8,643,500 |

44. Analysis of the information in Table 4 indicates the following:

- The greatest volume of sales over the three financial years 2011/12 to

2013/14 has been of properties valued at over £300,000, and the sale of these properties has resulted in over 50% of all void disposal receipts.

- These properties tend to be street properties with gardens and sold with the freehold. It should be noted however that more and more properties across all disposal categories are being valued at this level, with 1 and 2 bed flats now achieving close to £300,000.
- The 11 properties valued at over £300,000, and sold in 2013/14, achieved an average £647,000 per property; however it should be noted that 2 of those properties, 21 & 23 Park Street were sold at auction as one lot for £2.9m.
- No estate based properties above the third floor were either referred or sold in 2012/13 and 2013/14. This compares to 2009/10 when the disposal strategy began and the majority of referrals and subsequent sales (70%) were small estate based flats, and no properties that year were valued at £400,000.

45. Table 5 below represents sales since 2010/11 by bedsize. It should be noted that converted street flats where sold as a single house have been counted here as the combined bedsize, i.e. 2 x 2 bed flats sold as a single house is shown as 1 x 4 bed.

Table 5 - Average Values

| Year | bedsit | 1 bed | 2 bed | 3 bed | 4 bed | 5+ bed |
|---------|--------|-------|-------|-------|-------|--------|
| 2010/11 | 3 | 34 | 10 | 9 | 2 | |
| 2011/12 | 2 | 25 | 10 | 6 | 1 | 4 |
| 2012/13 | | 6 | 1 | 6 | 1 | |
| 2013/14 | | 2 | 5 | 3 | | 6 |

46. In 2010/11 the average receipt for a 1 bed disposal was £157,022. This increased to £189,322 in 2011/12, £211,500 in 2012/13 and £262,000 in 2013/14. 2 beds increased in a similarly incremental way from £225,625 in 2010/11 to £334,100 in 2013/14, and 3 beds from £326,444 in 2010/11 to £495,000 in 2013/14. Larger 4 bed plus properties achieved between £575,000 and 1m last year.

47. The Market Trends Bulletin records average sale values in Southwark in 2013/14 as follows:

- 1 beds £296,518
- 2 bed flats £398,146
- 2 bed houses £497,402
- 3 bed houses £617,684
- 4 beds £811,049.

48. As can be seen above average receipts for void sales have been below the market average.

49. The majority of general void disposals are sold through two auction houses, each holding around seven auctions per year each.

50. Leaseholders in occupation of street properties including a flat being earmarked for disposal used to be offered first refusal with the aim that the void flat would be sold along with the freehold. This is no longer the case due to the experience of protracted negotiations that ended with no sale and ultimately lengthy overall void periods.

51. The analysis of sales since 2011/12 to date shows that:

- Property values in Southwark have risen significantly since the review of the voids disposal strategy in May 2011.
- Less than half the anticipated numbers of voids were sold to achieve roughly the same receipt.
- The average receipt per void in 2012/13 exceeded the over £300,000 value limit criterion.
- Since 2011/12 more voids have been sold under the £300,000 criterion than any other category and generated the greatest receipt.

Way forward

52. Taking this and other factors noted in this report into account it is proposed that the categories included in the disposal criteria be changed from the existing, as agreed by cabinet in May 2011 and as laid out below:

- Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, A & B, converted street flats above the ground floor, with a view to being able to sell the freehold interest of the house
- Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, estate properties in a block above the third floor
- Void properties valued over £300,000
- Listed residential properties
- Properties deemed uneconomic to repair
- Flats in blocks or a house with an already high level of leaseholders, and where sale would potentially allow the disposal of the freehold
- Prefabricated homes.

To the following:

- Bedsit, 1 & 2 bed, converted street flats above the ground floor, with a view to being able to sell the freehold interest of the house
- Void properties valued over £500,000*
- Listed residential properties
- Properties deemed uneconomic to repair, following consideration of its value as a long term asset to the council and in parallel with available resources in the annual major voids repair budget
- Properties with inappropriate layouts eg, where a bathroom is off a bedroom and where changes to the layout are restricted or uneconomic
- Flats in a house with an already high level of leaseholders, and where sale would potentially allow the disposal of the freehold
- Prefabricated bungalows

* Where properties are identified for disposal under the £500,000 value criterion, at least one of the other criteria should also apply.

53. It is anticipated that the majority of disposals will continue be of non-estate properties, and that estate properties will only be considered for disposal on an exceptional basis.

54. The number of disposals will be based on the requirements of the HIP and will therefore be subject to monitoring and review.

Monitoring

55. The capital receipts achieved for the HIP are monitored and reported to the regular Investment Programme Group meetings, including a breakdown by type of disposal, including voids sales, and incorporated into the level of anticipated resources for planning the longer term programme. It is proposed that a monitoring report continues to be provided on a quarterly basis for the cabinet Member for Housing.

Impact on housing need

56. The disposal of any property irrespective of size or type will have an impact on the council's ability to meet its housing need in some way. As of May 2014 there were 19,582 households registered on the council's Homesearch general register. A breakdown by band is as follows:

- Band 1 – 853 (decants, statutory overcrowded, under occupiers, complex social service)
- Band 2 – 860 (overcrowded and urgent medical, homeless and urgent medical, single young vulnerable, management transfer, care leavers, risk to life)
- Band 3 – 6,481 (overcrowded by 1 bedroom, accepted homeless, urgent medical, tenant relationship breakdown, insanitary conditions)
- Band 4 – 9,445 (waiting list non priority; tenants, HA tenants and non-tenants)
- Other, all bands – 1943 (including wheelchair accessible units and sheltered accommodation).

57. When looking at demand on the basis of bedsize, roughly 70% of registered applicants, across bands 1 to 4 require 1 and 2 bedroom properties, with 30% requiring 3 bed or larger. This has changed from the position at the May 2011 review which noted 80% of households on the register requiring 1 & 2 bedroom properties with the remaining 20% waiting for 3 bed or larger.

58. It is known that waiting times increase based on banding, band 1 being the highest, and bedsize; the higher the band priority, the shorter the wait, but waiting times increase for larger properties. Table 6 below shows average waiting times across the top 3 bands.

Table 6 – Waiting times in months

| Band | bedsit | 1 bed | 2 bed | 3 bed | 4 bed |
|-------------|---------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|
| 1 | 1 | 6-14 | 6-18 | 5-11 | 6-12 |
| 2 | 2 | 2-8 | 2-10 | 4-19 | 7-23 |
| 3 | 14 | 21-24 | 34-37 | 40-55 | 37-69 |

Policy implications

59. Additional capital resources generated through the council's voids disposal strategy will contribute to the improvement of housing stock borough wide thus working towards the wider corporate objective of making homes warm, dry and safe.

Community impact statement

60. The sale of council housing will have a negative impact in terms of the number of properties available for re letting borough wide and may adversely affect applicants on the council's housing register. However, this will be partly offset by increased investment in existing stock, thus extending its life. Impact will also be mitigated by the development of new affordable housing supply, both by Registered Providers' programmes, and the council's direct delivery schemes.

Investment implications

61. The Housing Investment Programme includes a provision for fees and internal charges incurred in connection with the disposal of housing properties, pending the receipt from sale being available.

SUPPLEMENTARY ADVICE FROM OTHER OFFICERS

Director of Legal Services

62. The report highlights the changes that have taken place in recent years in relation to property disposals as the council tries to balance the requirement to achieve additional capital receipts against the need to meet the demands for council housing and in particular the larger three bedroom plus family homes.
63. The position has become further complicated by the dramatic rise both in the average receipt per property and the number of properties being sold under Right to Buy.
64. There are no legal issues arising at this stage from any of the recommendations contained within this report.
65. It is emphasised that if a disposal of an individual property is for an amount in excess of £500,000 (excluding Right to Buy and Leasehold Reform Act cases) then the decision currently needs to be taken by cabinet. Property prices have increased dramatically within the Borough over the past few years and it is therefore suggested at paragraph 6 of this report that this threshold is increased to £750,000 but this amendment will need to be confirmed.

Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services (FC14/010)

66. This report seeks cabinet approval to revise the criteria for disposals in the void disposal strategy. It also notes progress and agrees a change in focus from the setting of an annual target for void disposals to an ongoing assessment of the resource requirements. The financial implications are outlined in the body of the report.
67. It is expected that close monitoring of the receipts will continue to ensure that these funds are available to support the Housing Investment Programme. The new approach to linking receipts to resource requirements will be reported quarterly to cabinet as part of the capital budget monitoring report.

APPENDICES

| No. | Title |
|------|-------|
| None | |

AUDIT TRAIL

| | | |
|---|---|-------------------------|
| Cabinet Member | Councillor Richard Livingstone, Housing | |
| Lead Officer | Stephen Platts, Director of Regeneration | |
| Report Author | Stephen Read, Project Coordinator Housing Regeneration and Delivery | |
| Version | Final | |
| Dated | 10 July 2014 | |
| Key Decision | Yes | |
| CONSULTATION WITH OTHER OFFICERS/ DIRECTORATES/ CABINET MEMBER | | |
| Officer Title | Comments Sought | Comment Included |
| Director of Legal Services | Yes | Yes |
| Strategic Director of Finance and Corporate Services | Yes | Yes |
| Cabinet Member | Yes | Yes |
| Date final report sent to constitutional team | | 10 July 2014 |