

Tenant Focus Group's Review of Voids Management

Who we are

We are volunteer tenants who independently investigate Stroud District Council's Housing Services and make recommendations for improvement. We chose to focus on/scrutinise Voids Management because it:

- Benefits all tenants
- Policies, performance & customer feedback indicates there are concerns
- It's a common concern raised by tenants and the Tenants' Voice representatives
- National housing regulations and standards apply (see appendix 1)
- A recent internal audit was carried out
- It can be compared with similar landlords

Most importantly, we want this review to help as many people as possible, who need a home, to be housed as quickly as possible.

Scope

- To understand the effectiveness of the council's current management of empty homes within its stock
- To ensure tenants are engaged in helping to shape and improve this aspect of housing services

How we did the scrutiny

We examined the service through a document review and requested key documents (see appendix 2). This included a summary of key elements drawn from a lengthy Voids Management Audit report by an assigned group member.

We interviewed the Interim Head of Housing and the Property Care Operations Manager.

Two group members attended a national tenants' conference hosted by Tenant Participation Advisory Service (TPAS). This enabled them to understand more about housing regulations and standards as well as meet and share experiences with other tenants from across the UK.

Our Key Findings

There's no Voids Policy in place although there is already a procedure and detailed flow chart in place.

Voids processes are performed by three different systems being used by several teams across the council. We found the management of voids is full of complexity requiring different council teams to work in a unified way. The council's I.T. team together with the Housing Systems team are currently working on the creation of an integrated system to reduce inefficiencies.

The Property Care Operations Manager (in post from March 2021) has been concentrating on minimising void times and at the same time balanced this focus with consideration to

vulnerable applicants. The work in progress currently* is at 35 voids. At the time of the voids management audit there were 150 voids in progress.

To tackle major voids (40% of current void properties), additional labour and resource is required. Major voids usually require a minimum of 20 days (man hours) to bring up to a lettable standard. This has led to compromises being made (and agreed with incoming tenants).

Properties are not always let in accordance with the 'Lettings Standard'. This may be attributable to the fact that the service has concentrated on getting the internal part of the building habitable to reduce 'handover' times and enable a family to move in sooner rather than later.

There have been considerable difficulties with utility transfer problems nationally since the pandemic. This meant properties could not be connected to mains gas or the electricity grid. A new intermediary provider recently entered the marketplace but there are still 'teething' problems, leading to further delays in letting.

A national skills shortage has meant that there was and remains stiff competition for experienced tradesmen. The council offers good working conditions but has been unable to increase staff wages in line with inflation. This has led to staff departing for employment with housing providers who are able to offer higher wages. This situation also affects the council's capacity to take on apprentices. Apprentices need to work with appropriately experienced trades people who themselves have sufficient time to give instruction and mentor.

There's a need for more staff experienced in contract management not just in voids but in every area of the housing service. SDC's current voids contractor, however, is excellent and deemed one of the better ones.

Pre-Void inspections ensure that tenants are given a list of repairs they are responsible for completing during their period of notice. The Property Care team aren't given this information before the notice period expires/keys are handed in.

The time taken for keys to be handed over to the Property Care team, and sometimes the total number, is a logistical issue that requires attention.

A fifth of properties require cleaning or bulky items removal (even curtains, carpets and light fittings are stripped out regardless of their condition) before a survey can take place, causing a delay of five days or more.

There's often a crossover of orders between departing tenants for bulky items collections and Property Care removals leading to double charging to the tenant and inconvenience/wasted resource to the housing service.

Gardens can cost a lot to put right.

Householders' inability to maintain their home in a satisfactory manner, often because of various health conditions, are a common reason for major (rather than minor) voids. In some cases, offers of modernising upgrades have been declined over a long tenure and/or there may be unauthorised alterations made to the fabric of the property. Currently, there is 2:1 ratio of majors to minors because of the time taken to conclude them and the scale of works required.

There's no dedicated staff resource to oversee the transfer of tenured properties to voids.

There's a time lag between properties being ready to let and advertising.

Information about ready-to-let properties on the HomeSeekers Plus website is minimal in comparison to private marketplace lettings websites.

* August 2022

Recommendations

1. A senior manager to update the Tenant Focus Group (TFG) on progress made in improving voids management. The group requests that this is diarised for the end of October 2022 (three months after their Q & A session).
2. In consultation with/involvement of tenants, a 'Voids Management' policy which takes account of interlinked services/teams' policies and procedures, needs to be established. The TFG are particularly keen to see the provision of good practice examples (from Helen Scullard, Interim Head of Housing) and tenant involvement in voids management policy development.
3. An I.T. system which integrates the different systems currently in use and streamlines processes to minimise inefficiencies is required. In the interim, we recommend that dedicated staff resource is implemented (liaison role?) so that a more efficient transition can be made between a tenant's departure and handover of keys to Property Care. i.e., communication dedicated to ensuring departing tenants understand and fulfil terms and conditions; supporting full clearance of the property (see recommendation 8 below for details) and ensuring Property Care receive timely information about the notice period and details arising from the pre-void inspection.
4. A pay review for tradespeople should be undertaken urgently to support the recruitment and retention of employees with these crucial skills.
5. Carry out a consultation on the Lettings Standard with tenants to encourage dialogue around tenant expectations and what is feasible when presented with practical reality.
6. Implement training and development of staff in contract management.
7. Implement an efficient communications process between the Tenancy Management and Property Care teams so that the latter have advance information of properties which are due to become vacant. This will enable Property Care to speed up processes for minor voids (see recommendation 2 above).
8. Ensure satisfactory and timely arrangements are put in place for the handover of keys. This is contingent on
 - a) the efficient operation of recommendation 6, and
 - b) the implementation of recommendation 3 above. i.e., a liaison officer(s) can arrange and agree the logistics of handing over numerous keys (for a time when there are a lot of voids) to the receiving property care manager.

9. Embed the council's sustainability goals across the service area by implementing a "Re-Use and Recycle" initiative to ensure that unwanted items of decent quality in void properties are donated to charities or recycled. A group of residents, representative officers (such as the suggested liaison officer in recommendation 3) and council partners to be set up dedicated to the aim minimising the amount of waste that goes to landfill and minimises costs. This should be reflected in a revised Lettings Standard.
10. Implement a rolling three-year tenancy audit. This would enable the council to detect and give appropriate support to vulnerable tenants. It would also ensure that tenants exercise their responsibilities in maintaining their tenured property satisfactorily. Well-maintained homes and gardens are less likely to result in major voids when tenancies come to an end.
11. As suggested in section 8b of the recommendations in the Voids Audit report; develop in consultation with tenant representatives, a 'Tenant Incentive Scheme' and roll out it out as a pilot initially.
12. To reduce the time lag between the property becoming ready-to-let and a new tenant moving in, advertising on HomeSeeker Plus website should have more information about each property (layout, photos of rooms, local amenities etc.) along with a viewing date and time. This information should also be accessible as a printed document. Multiple applicants should see the property at the same time although there will be individual cases where the council will have to make reasonable adjustments for applicants who have vulnerabilities.
13. Set up a procedure for Repairs & Maintenance managers to report back to the TFG at quarterly intervals. This would enable tenants to check/confirm that the service has improved because of the voids management policy.
14. Opportunities to be made available for further tenant involvement in areas such as recruitment and void/letting inspections. For example, tenants could be involved in helping to ensure tenant engagement is satisfactorily incorporated when producing staff job descriptions and personal specifications. Another tenant involvement area which should be developed and implemented are roles such as Tenant Repairs Inspector or Homes-to-let Inspector are also suggested.

Appendix 1

Standards and legislation

The legal and best practice framework for the management of voids requires compliance with the following

- Localism Act 2011.
- The Housing Act 1985.
- Housing Act 1996.
- Gas Safety (Installation and Use) Regulations 1998 (GSIUR) as amended 2018. Approved Code of Practice and guidance.
- British Standard 7671 As Amended (Electrical Installations)
- Data Protection Act 2018 and GDPR.
- Equalities Act 2010

Relevant consumer standards set out by the Regulator for Social Housing are:

Home Standard – quality of accommodation and repairs and maintenance

Tenancy Standard – how properties are allocated/exchanged and terms around tenure

These standards specifically set out the following requirements

- To minimise the time that a property is empty between lettings – taking account of the circumstances of the new tenant.
- To meet applicable statutory requirements that provide for the health and safety of new occupants.
- To demonstrate an appropriate balance of planned and responsive repairs; including cyclical repairs, capital work, work on empty properties and adaptations.
- To ensure tenants' homes meet the standard set out in the Government's Decent Homes Guidance and continue to maintain their housing stock to at least this standard

Appendix 2

List of Documents

- Tenant Engagement Strategy
- Repairs and Information Event Report
- Café Conversations Event (Feb 2022) Report
- Complaints Report (4th Quarter 2021-22)
- Voids Management Audit Report
- Pre-termination Inspection form
- Void Process Map Overview
- Annual Report 2018/19
- STAR Survey 2019