

Tenants Together Voids Service Review

A Briefing Paper Summarising the Work of the Voids Scrutiny Working Group

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Regulatory Framework clearly states that tenants should have opportunities to shape service delivery and to hold Councillors to account. To achieve this, stock holding local authorities are expected to engage meaningfully with their tenants and to offer them opportunities to mould the tailoring of services to shape local priorities. In particular, the Council, as a landlord, is expected to give tenants an opportunity to scrutinise performance, identify areas for improvement and influence future delivery.

2.0 Reason for the review

- 2.1 The Voids Service was selected for scrutiny review by Tenants Together as we are striving to improve performance in this area. Whilst performance is improving, it is still under performing against our annual target. It is important that properties are re-let on a timely basis to maximise income for the Housing Service. Failure to address this issue will have an impact on the Housing Revenue account (HRA).

3.0 Who we are

- 3.1 We are a group of tenants, called Tenants Together, who are working closely with the Mid Devon District Council's Housing Services.
- 3.2 We take in depth look at various services provided by the Housing Service in the running of its homes and services.
- 3.3 We investigate our chosen topics and report recommendations to the Decent & Affordable Homes Policy and Development Group (D&AH PDG).
- 3.4 The Tenants Together members agreed to undertake a service review on voids and set up a Scrutiny Working Group. The members involved in undertaking this service review were:
- Patricia Cowie
 - Trudy Saunders

4.0 The scope of the review

- 4.1 The report details the findings of the Voids Service Review Working Group. The subject was chosen by the Tenants Together in partnership with the landlord.
- 4.2 This is a tenant-led project with the aim of reviewing the current performance and quality of the voids process and making recommendations for improvements.
- 4.3 The Voids Service Review Working Group produced an Action Plan set out in Appendix A.
- 4.4 The Voids Service Review Group has assessed data and information provided including:
- Reviewing our policies, procedures and literature relating to our voids

- Interviewing Mark Baglow, Patrick Hyde, Michael Parker, Sian Sandy, Tanya Webber and the DLO's Voids Team
- Comparing our procedure with other landlords and visited North Devon Homes and East Devon District Council to investigate how they undertake their voids process
- Viewing a void property
- Accompanying a Tenant Inspector for Voids on a void inspection
- Speaking with tenants who had recently taken a tenancy with us

5.0 Overview of Scrutiny Findings and Recommendations

The Scrutiny Working Group's Findings	The Scrutiny Working Group's Recommendations
1.1 17 day target – already a tight turnaround this includes a possible wait of 7 days for asbestos check and a gas check.	<p>Leave target as it is.</p> <p>Management response: The Cabinet Member wishes to reserve the right to reduce the target in the future, if necessary</p>
1.2 Properties not visited sometimes for several years. The risk of tenants feeling they can adapt properties as they wish.	<p>Tenancy home checks key to stopping this. Employ someone just for this role, saving money on voids. Recruit more Tenant Reps for all areas who could help.</p> <p>Management response: It is unlikely that one person would have the capacity to visit every single property. It is agreed that Tenancy Home Checks are important</p>
1.3 Paint Packs – cost £58.50 + £52.00 per decoration essentials + paint £10.50 £5.25. This is not having a positive impact on condition of voids returned. Many tenants not having the appropriate skills required to paint to government standard.	<p>Stop this system. Employ apprentices to paint all properties that require it.</p> <p>Management response: The Decent & Affordable Homes PDG (PDG) will be asked to make a decision on this as part of the discussion relating to the new policy on void management. Managers feel that paint packs can offer value for money because it is cheaper than paying someone to paint the property. Apprentices still need supervision and training and there is an issue about whether or not it would be appropriate to employ apprentices to do this type of work. Paint packs can also be useful if there is a hard to let property.</p>
1.4 Clean & Clear Reward £100 per property. Nothing to suggest this has a positive outcome of void properties returned. This requirement is also part of the Tenancy Agreement.	<p>Stop this system or reinforce inspection process. If a property has obtained a clean & clear reward it shouldn't need a paint pack etc.</p> <p>Management response: The PDG will be asked to discuss this.</p>
1.5 Decoration Grant (internal) – given to tenants after they have painted £75 – 1 bed, £100 – 2 bed, £150 – 3 bed.	<p>Scrap this system. Tenants are currently being given money to decorate their properties and this is already a requirement in their tenancy agreement.</p>

	<p>Management response: The PDG will be asked to discuss this.</p>
<p>1.6 Voids Managements Policy out of date. We took a thorough look at this policy and matched it against interviews of staff for best practice.</p> <p>Areas highlighted:</p> <p>A further £20 will be offered if.....</p> <p>Additional works to hard to let properties.</p>	<p>Update as per recommendations below.</p> <p>This doesn't happen (MB).</p> <p>This doesn't happen.</p> <p>Management response: A new policy has been drafted and this is to be presented to the PDG.</p>
<p>1.7 Voids Policy - A mains powered Carbon Monoxide alarm</p> <p>Decorating.</p> <p>Heating & Hot Water.</p>	<p>This should read 'or battery'.</p> <p>Update this if systems are scrapped.</p> <p>The property will have space and water heating that is safe and ready to use. This does not make sense.</p> <p>Management response: A new policy has been drafted and this is to be presented to the PDG</p>
<p>1.8 Our Standard of Repair for Empty Properties leaflet.</p> <p>Standard was developed with the help of Council tenants on the Repairs & Maintenance focus group. This is now out of date.</p> <p>Your comments.</p> <p>Whole leaflet out of date.</p> <p>Ensure tenants know legalities around tenancy.</p>	<p>Out of date – update as below. Make more user friendly.</p> <p>Review the standard.</p> <p>Not user friendly or very informative.</p> <p>Update as necessary.</p> <p>Decent Home standard.</p> <p>Management response: Agreed. The leaflet needs updating.</p>
<p>1.9 Where are materials sourced from? Are we getting best value?</p>	<p>Look into this further to get a better deal. Possibly join the Devon Wide consortium like East Devon District Council are part of.</p> <p>Management response: we take great care to achieve good value for money in relation to procurement and negotiate directly with manufacturers, in many cases. Therefore, it is felt that there is little to be gained by joining a procurement club. The Cabinet Member has suggested procurement as a topic for a future service review.</p>

1.10 When a prospective tenant applies on Devon Home Choice to live in Mid Devon the property is given to them subject to references being satisfactory. If a prospective tenant is privately renting - they would have to give at least four weeks notice - this can mean that they are paying on two properties.	<p>When a person applies to become a Mid Devon tenant references should be taken immediately. This will also help to eliminate tenancy fraud.</p> <p>Management response: The Council receives approximately 20 requests for rehousing each week. We need to limit the work associated with registering these cases. All cases in Band B are visited and their circumstances verified. Furthermore, there are approximately 700 cases in Band D most of whom are unlikely to be rehoused. We need to focus on those who are rehoused.</p>
1.11 Tenancies can be ended online with other housing providers – after keys have been returned.	<p>Now that we have a new system can this be done in Mid Devon.</p> <p>Management response: the Council insist on notice of 4 weeks, in all cases. We can look at whether or not this is feasible but there may be issues in terms of legality and also compatibility on our system.</p>
1.12 New tenant questionnaire – not user friendly. Doesn't ask key questions.	<p>Please refer to NDH questionnaire – Appendix C. Offer the forms in other formats</p> <p>Management response: the questionnaire needs updating and we will review it, with reference to the NDH document, as an example of good practice.</p>

2 Conclusion

The TT Members involved in this review would like to thank the housing staff and tenants who gave their time to assist them in this review.

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