



South Holland District Council

Review of
Re-letting of Void Properties

An Overview and Scrutiny Review undertaken by the Re-letting of Voids
Task Group on behalf of Performance Monitoring Panel.

10th July 2017
V5

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1. Introduction

- 1.1 South Holland District Council owns and manages just fewer than 4000 council homes across the district. An average 26 council properties per month become empty and are handed back to the Housing Service to assess any maintenance work required before they are re-let.
- 1.2 A works inspector will visit each property and arrange for any repair works needed to bring the property back to a lettable standard to be carried out by the Construction Services Team or one of the council's other contractors.
- 1.3 At the 15 June 2016 meeting of the Performance Monitoring Panel, Members raised their concerns, under the Quarterly Performance Report item, regarding the re-letting of void properties performance.
- 1.4 Members of the Council agreed that there needed to be an understanding of how the current position had been arrived at, and that a Task Group would provide the appropriate means to do so.
- 1.5 In order to understand the situation, the performance of the current voids process would need to be evaluated alongside the council's management of housing allocations and tenancy policies and procedures.
- 1.6 The Performance Monitoring Panel agreed that the Task Group should be focussed, with the intention of understanding the current problems around the re-letting of void properties, and making recommendations to improve performance. This in turn would reduce the time a council property is void, helping to reduce costs to the council and improve accommodation availability for those on the Housing Register.

2. Scope of the Review

- 2.1 The scope and therefore terms of reference were defined as:
 - To consider performance, in relation to the time a property is void;
 - To make recommendations on how to improve this performance.

3. Membership of Task Group

The Task Group comprised of Councillors G R Aley (Chairman), M D Booth, CJ T H Brewis and T A Carter. The Lead Officer was Emily Spicer and the Task Group was supported by Christine Morgan.

4. Background to Review

- 4.1 The review was conducted as a result of worsening performance data received by Members of the Performance Monitoring Panel for the re-letting of void properties. An understanding of the current processes that link re-letting of

council properties was sought to review the interaction in the Housing Service between allocations, maintenance and re-letting of properties.

5. Method of Review

- 5.1 The Task Group met on a number of occasions to consider the processes in respect to the void property processes. Officer witnesses called were:

Martin Cregg (Interim Housing Landlord Services Manager)
Ken Bell (Housing Operational Manager)
Joanne Craik (Sheltered Housing Supervisor)
Nigel Claridge (CSU Voids Supervisor)
Katie Potter (Technical Officer)
Charlotte Paine (Business Intelligence Officer)
Gerry McKeivitt (Property Services Manager)

External witnesses called were

Mr Ross Bangs (Housing Manager, Breckland Council).

6. Summary of Findings

- 6.1 The Task Group were provided with the current process flows for both the General needs and Sheltered Housing stock. Both process flows were complex incorporating functions across the allocations, housing management and Construction Services Units (CSU) teams. The Task Group were informed that some steps within the process should be improved. For example, key returns, application for 'giving notice', new tenant applications.
- 6.2 All voids data is captured within a single spreadsheet, for example address, number of refusals, tenant notice received, dates of keys received and so forth. This spreadsheet is managed by the CSU however requires input from several sources across the Housing Service. This leads to delays and inaccuracies.
- 6.3 The Task Group found that the majority of void properties were taking 20 to 30 days to be re-let. Smaller numbers of properties took much longer to let. A recent example was over 72 days. The Sheltered Housing stock was the main source of void properties and long void times. The reasons for this ranged from the type of property on offer E.g. 1 bedroom flat, no waiting list for Sheltered Housing accommodation, gardens too large, too rural a location and so forth. A strategy needs to be formed imminently in disposing of hard to let properties and reinvest in areas where housing is required.
- 6.4 The Task Group learned that the recently renewed allocations policy has successfully reduced the housing waiting list from 2,500 applicants to 250. Housing Officers advised that they were concerned that this has reduced demand so significantly that some void properties have no applicants or offers made to them.

- 6.5 It was discovered that limited data is held advising why prospective tenants refused properties after they had viewed them. In addition, properties were only offered to one applicant at a time with 7 days to make their choice. This causes unnecessary delays. Applicants may be offered up to 3 properties.
- 6.6 The Task Group were advised that a 'Choice Based Lettings' system is not currently operated within SHDC. The authority had dismissed the system several years previous, however it was acknowledged that the housing market and digital agenda had moved on since then. New advertising methods were needed, especially when marketing difficult to let properties.
- 6.7 Reference checking for prospective tenants is currently undertaken once a property has been viewed and agreed. This again can delay the process should references not be adequate, which would restart the allocations process again with a new applicant.
- 6.8 Very little marketing information is provided on each property. For example, photos of the property inside and outside, local amenities, distance to local schools/shops. This is left for prospective tenants to investigate. This needs to be addressed so that promotion of properties and therefore the re-let procedure is as efficient as possible.
- 6.9 The Task Group heard that only 'light touch' tenancy management was undertaken. This could lead to issues such as vandalism of properties being unmanaged until the property becomes void. Conversely, exit interviews are conducted during the 28 days of notice with only 26% of recharges ever being received.
- 6.10 Whilst the CSU provided both good responsive and reactive repairs to the housing stock, questions over the efficiency of the work force came to light. In addition, many tasks such as asbestos surveys, voids clearances and EPC certificates relied upon the availability of external contractors.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

- 7.1 The Task Group reached the following **conclusions**:
- (a) That the re-letting of void properties within the housing stock is a complex process, cutting through several teams and functions across the council. One team managing this process would increase efficiency and effectiveness.
 - (b) That due to changes in digital marketing and tenants requirements that the council needs to take more of a commercial approach to re-letting its properties. It is essential that property keys return on the correct day or before, that access is given to the property during the notice period for assessment and that recharge liability is clearly communicated to tenants at all stages of the process so that they have opportunity to rectify damages. These actions will also reduce the delay in the voids process and the costs associated with clearance and re-letting.

- (c) That multiple prospective tenant's viewings are essential once a property becomes available. In order to do this, social media must be used as a marketing tool as well as other marketing sources.
- (d) That housing management needs to be robust at all points of tenancy so that properties are managed and maintained adequately and recharges are paid as appropriate.
- (e) That there is a need for a review of external contracts for tasks in the voids process.
- (f) That a strategic property review is needed in respect to the hard to let properties within the housing stock in conjunction with the current allocations policy.
- (g) That the Task Groups formation has already resulted in positive changes to the voids process and procedure.

7.2 The Task Group makes the following **recommendations**:

- a) That the voids process is amalgamated into one voids team and the process along with a number of actions within this are refined and/or removed. This is for all properties within the housing stock (Sheltered or General needs housing). This may rely upon digital applications, key safes at properties to allow quicker access once vacated and automated communications with customers.
- b) That the management of tenancies is overhauled to ensure property standards are maintained and/or recharges for repairs are appropriately received. This includes procedures used at the commencement of any new tenancy to ensure the efficiency and effectiveness of tenancy management and to ensure everyone, including the tenant, is aware of their duties and responsibilities during their tenancy. This includes a need for clear communication of procedures to be followed during and at the end of the tenancies, such as the handing in of notice and the timescales/method to be followed for the return of keys. This way of working will ensure swift timescales at the start of the process and support subsequent actions in the process to meet turnaround times.
- c) That the marketing of properties is undertaken, with new methods actively sought. In the first instance it is recommended that the Council website and face book page is utilised to market properties. Especially those where interest has been lacking. Other techniques such as choice based lettings should be investigated further and where appropriate put into action.
- d) That the current contracts are reviewed that directly impact the voids timeline, potentially seeking to bring back in-house some services such as Energy Performance Certificate assessing.

- e) That the current allocations policy is reviewed for effectiveness alongside a strategic property review for hard to let properties within the housing stock.
- f) That the Housing Allocations policy is reviewed to ensure that waiting lists are appropriate for the housing need of South Holland.
- g) That the voids process provides high quality properties within a consistent turn around that meets the needs of our tenants
- h) That these recommendations are allocated to an identified officer to ensure their action and that an update is received by the Performance Monitoring Panel on actions against these at 7th November 2017 meeting.

8. Financial Implications of Recommendations

- 8.1 The above recommendations should be included within current resources and will therefore provide no financial implications to South Holland District Council at this time.

9. Main Sources of Information and individuals contacted during the Review

- 9.1 The main sources of information were through those witnesses referred to in section 5.

10. Abbreviations

CSU – Construction Services Unit
EPC – Energy Performance Certificate