

SOUTH HOLLAND DISTRICT COUNCIL

Report of: Portfolio Holder Housing and Health & Executive Director - Place

To: Performance Monitoring Panel, Wednesday, 20 March 2019

(Author: Phil Stacey, Housing Options Manager)

Subject Re-Letting of Void Properties Task Group

Purpose: To provide the panel with an update on progress against the Task Groups recommendations.

Recommendation(s):

- 1) That the panel note the contents of the report.

1.0 BACKGROUND

1.1 South Holland District Council currently owns and manages 3,847 Council properties. Around 1,200 of these homes are in Spalding and approximately 400 in Holbeach with the remaining units spread through the small rural villages that make up the South Holland area. There are around 1,000 sheltered homes with the remaining properties being flats and houses. On average, 22 properties become void each month. Over the last 12 months, the overall re-let time, key to key for all tenures is reported as follows.

1.2

Month	Housing re-let time (total average key to key in days) All Tenures.
January 2018	34
February 2018	42
March 2018	36
April 2018	34
May 2018	42
June 2018	38
July 2018	26
August 2018	42
September 2018	36
October 2018	22
November 2018	25
December 2018	12
January 2019	26

1.3 Following the Re-Letting of Void Properties task group in July 2017, the panel has received updates in November 2017, May 2018 and September 2018 together with information provided within quarterly performance monitoring reports. Updates against the task group's recommendations are provided below.

1.4

	Recommendations	Actions to date
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.	Following the Place Services review in September 2017, the Available Homes Team continue to hold ownership of the voids process and ensure that properties are re-let in a timely manner. Currently, the Available Homes Team coordinate the processing of void properties with timely interventions from the Business Support Team, Housing Services Team and the Housing Repairs Team. Increased communications are being promoted through weekly voids meetings to discuss the progress of void repairs, ensuring properties in the highest demand are prioritised for completion first.
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.	The task group recommended that the management of tenancies be overhauled to ensure that greater emphasis is placed on the tenant to adhere to their responsibilities throughout the duration of their tenancy. Housing Neighbourhood Officers are now carrying out a programme of tenancy audits to identify and address issues during the lifetime of a tenancy. The end of tenancy process has also been revised to include a clear end of tenancy letter which is now used for all customers who serve the Council with a valid notice to quit (appendix A). The letter clearly outlines the tenant's responsibilities and how the Council expects properties to be handed back. End of tenancy visits are also conducted to identify void repairs at the earliest opportunity, particularly major repairs. Planning repairs earlier enables works to be undertaken at the earliest opportunity once a property becomes void. This visit is also used as an opportunity to discuss repairs and damage the tenant may be responsible for.
c	That the marketing of properties is undertaken, with new methods actively sought. In the first instance it is recommended that the Council	It is noted that the marketing of properties outside of those applicants listed on the housing register was a recommendation of the task group. This

	website and Facebook 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.	opportunity hasn't currently been explored further. However, future improvements to the Councils Housing IT systems and integration with the Councils digital agenda will enable opportunities to be explored again.
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.	Concerns raised in relation to contracts have now been addressed. Voids property maintenance is now overseen by an interim Voids Supervisor within the Housing Repairs Team. Specific oversight of void properties ensures a single point of contact for the Available Homes Team so that progress can be reported ensuring lettings happen without delay once void works are completed.
e	That the current allocations policy is reviewed for effectiveness alongside a strategic property review for hard to let properties within the housing stock. That the Housing Allocations policy is reviewed to ensure that waiting lists are appropriate for the housing need of South Holland.	The limitations of the Housing Allocations Policy have been considered with changes proposed to the Policy Development Panel in September 2018. The approval of the Policy will be considered by Cabinet on the 12 March 2019. Subject to the revised policy being implemented, this will marginally increase the eligibility criteria for joining the housing register and increase the criteria for accessing sheltered housing. Sheltered Housing has been noted as an area of concern where properties are deemed 'hard to let'. A project has also been commissioned to undertake a Strategic Asset Review. The results of this review will enable future planning of the Councils housing stock.
f	That the voids process provides high quality properties within a consistent turn around that meets the needs of our tenants.	Work is still required to establish a minimum void standard procedure. Customer satisfaction is considered consistently high due to low levels of complaints received in relation to properties recently let. We continue to see a consistently low level of failure during the introductory period of tenure.

2.0 OPTIONS

2.1 Option 1, That Members note the content provided in this report and provide any further feedback.

2.2 Option 2, Do nothing.

3.0 **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION(S)**

3.1 It is recommended that the contents of this report are noted and that members of the Performance Monitoring Panel have an up to date understanding of the changes to the approach in dealing with the re-let of void properties and the achievements of this approach so far.

4.0 **EXPECTED BENEFITS**

4.1 To return the maximum numbers of void properties back into use per annum.

4.2 To ensure that the right properties are available for the right person at the right time and at the right price.

5.0 **IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 **Corporate Priorities**

5.1.1 There is a strong link between enforcement and our corporate priorities, notably 'to have pride in South Holland by supporting the district and residents to develop and thrive.

5.2 **Crime and Disorder**

5.2.1 There is often a link between empty dwellings and anti-social behaviour. Addressing the issue of void properties should make a contribution to wider efforts to address anti-social behaviour.

5.3 **Financial**

5.3.1 Loss of income during void periods is an on-going cost to the Housing Revenue Account.

5.4 **Health & Wellbeing**

5.4.1 There is a positive link between investing in and providing quality housing within the district and the broader Health and Wellbeing agenda.

5.5 **Risk Management**

5.5.1 There are risks to the authority associated with certain courses of action designed to bring void properties back into use. For example, failing to bring void properties back into use has a financial risk in lost rent. Applicants on the Housing Register may have been awarded priority due to being homeless or at risk in their current accommodation. Therefore failure to allocate void properties in a timely manner would not support the Councils objective to support those in the greatest housing need.

5.6 **Staffing**

5.6.1 An Available Homes Team Leader and two Allocations Officers are available to manage the voids and lettings process. This is closely supported by work undertaken by Officers in Business Support, Housing Services and Housing Repairs.

5.7 Stakeholders / Consultation / Timescales

5.7.1 There are no known implications for stakeholders.

6.0 WARDS/COMMUNITIES AFFECTED

6.1 All Wards

7.0 ACRONYMS

7.1 **Void-** a term used to identify the period between the outgoing and incoming tenant occupying the property.

Background papers: - None

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Key Decision: **No**

Exempt Decision: **No**

This report refers to a Mandatory Service

Appendices attached to this report: None

Appendix A End of Tenancy Letter- SHDC